

I

Political Judgment in Its Historical Context

IN HIS RECENTLY PUBLISHED memoirs¹ the former British ambassador to the United States, Sir Christopher Meyer, describes a dinner party which he attended in Washington in early February 2001. George W. Bush had just been elected—or at any rate, inaugurated as—president of the United States, and the members of his new administration were awaiting the first visit of the British prime minister Tony Blair.² Present at the dinner were several close advisers of the new U.S. president, figures strongly associated with the Republican Right, so-called “neoconservatives” such as Richard Perle and David Frum. The conversation quickly moved to Britain’s recent decision at the meeting of the Council of Europe in Nice to support closer European defense cooperation. These “neoconservatives” thought that Blair had fallen victim to a French plot to harm the United States by introducing a new, independent military force in Europe, which could in principle compete with NATO. Sir Christopher, however, tried to convince them that the projected new form of defense cooperation represented no more than an increase in Europe’s ability to discharge subaltern functions *within* a NATO that would continue to be dominated by Washington. The new arrangements, correctly understood, were therefore not only no threat to the United States; they were in Washington’s own best long-term interest. Sir Christopher then continues:

I found it an uphill struggle to place our initiative in the context which Blair had intended.

I withstood a full frontal assault from all concerned against our alleged sell-out to the French . . . [One of the neoconservatives present] argued that now we were allowing ourselves to be corrupted by political correctness and socialist Europe. We were, he said, drifting away from our traditional transatlantic loyalties—look at the threat to fox-hunting, for Pete’s sake!

¹ Christopher Meyer, *DC Confidential* (Weidenfeld and Nichols, 2005), pp. 171–74.

² This event probably seemed more momentous to Sir Christopher than it did to the members of the new Republican administration in the United States. In fairness, Sir Christopher seems never to have been under any illusions about the asymmetrical nature of the relation between the political elites of the United States and those of its major client state.

Some of this was barking mad. But lurking in there was a serious point. How could even Tony Blair, the most gifted performer of his generation in the circus of British politics, ride the American and the European horses at the same time, without falling between two saddles?

The real answer was: with difficulty. At [this] dinner I fell back on the holy mantra of British foreign policy. There was no choice to be made between Britain's European and Atlantic vocations. If we were strong and influential in Europe, this would strengthen our hand in the US. If we were close to the US, this would redound to our benefit in Europe.

"No, no!" the cry went up around the table, in an unconscious echo of General De Gaulle, "Britain must choose." To this audience of Manicheans I sounded feeble and temporising, a typical product of the Foreign Office.³

This anecdote seems to me to present an archetypal instance of a "political" disagreement. One of the first features of it that strikes me is that it has a certain specific historical density. Sir Christopher in 2005 tells the story of a group of people who encountered each other in Washington in February 2001. At this meeting in 2001 each group presented, and tried to argue for, a radically different interpretation of a series of decisions which already at that time lay in the past, namely the decisions made at the meeting of the European Council in Nice in December 2000 about European defense. Each of the two different interpretations contains, as an integral part of itself, a divergent projection about what future we can expect to result from the events in Nice. Sir Christopher thinks it will strengthen Washington's ability to project its military power around the world; his neoconservative interlocutors deny this strenuously. This disagreement takes place within the framework of a set of values shared by both of the two participants to the discussion, namely the assumption that it is a good thing for the United States to be able to project its power as widely and effectively as possible. This, of course, is an assumption with which it would also be possible to disagree. It seems natural for us to say that the disagreement between Sir Christopher and the neoconservatives mirrors or results from differences in the respective "political judgments" each of the two parties make about the project of closer European cooperation on defense.

If one wants to understand what was going on in Sir Christopher's anecdote, one must keep in mind that most of the individuals engaged in this discussion had specific institutional roles which in some cases might give their words extra weight, but which would also require them to be especially circumspect in expressing themselves, and which might even require them on occasion to "represent" in public an institutional position about

³Meyer, *DC Confidential*, p. 174.

which they actually had some private doubts. In his memoirs Sir Christopher is admirably clear about the distinction between his role as a diplomat and thus a member of the Civil Service, and his own private views. He is equally clear about the distinction between either of these and particular policy decisions of the current UK government. Thus, in saying that the UK did not need to choose between an Atlantic and a European “vocation” he was, as he explicitly says above, voicing the institutional opinion of the British diplomatic corps. When he writes in the passage cited above that this policy was difficult to pursue successfully, I think we can assume that he is speaking in his private capacity, and I think we can be rather sure that Sir Christopher never said to his U.S. interlocutors even in private conversation that, to use his own pungent formulation, Mr. Blair’s project was to ride them as one of the horses in a two-horse circus act.

The political judgment expressed in a directive to the members of a highly centralized Leninist cadre party has a very different standing and meaning from the manifesto of a contemporary British political party. The abstraction of (mere) opinions or beliefs from their wider context may be highly useful, or even necessary, for certain purposes, but any kind of adequate understanding of political judgments will require reference back to that original full matrix of individual and institutional action. Even when the abstraction is perfectly justified, as it is for most normal cases, one will never know when extracting the judgment from its wider action context and formulating it as a “mere” belief will distort it, and in what way it will distort it.

The decision at the conference in Nice was a political act, a choice made by agents empowered to represent recognized states about a future set of courses of collective action, but the later disagreement between Sir Christopher and the neoconservatives about the retrospective interpretation of that original decision was also a political controversy and not a seminar discussion. I think it is a great failing of much contemporary political philosophy that it tends to focus too exclusively on discussion and also tries to construe discussion on the model of a highly idealized conception of what purely rational or scientific discussion is. Forming and holding opinions and engaging in discussion of those opinions are, of course, important parts of human life, but (a) opinion formation and discussion are not all there is to politics, and (b) even the formation and evaluation of opinions is comprehensible only in one or another of a number of different wider historical and institutional contexts; most of these contexts will be in one way or another action-orienting. Genuine understanding of any real or envisaged course of action, however, requires one to understand the concrete constellation of power within which it is located.

So in the rest of this paper I would like to try to elaborate an intentionally rather overdrawn distinction between a political disagreement and

a certain ideal-typical account of academic discussion. I will exaggerate slightly in order to bring out some features of the political which philosophers sometimes lose sight of. I wish to emphasize that I am *not* trying to assert any general distinction here between politics and science, but rather between politics and a certain set of philosophical claims that have been made about the nature of rational human discussion.

The political philosophers from whose untender embraces I would like to save politics focus their attention on deliberation resulting in a political judgment, where the process of deliberation is construed as a kind of discussion, the model for which is an idealized version of a Socratic dialogue. This idealized model is characterized by the following eight elements:

1. A judgment is essentially an opinion (or belief), that is, the affirmation or negation in thought of some proposition (“Tabitha has four paws”; “Thou shalt not kill”).
2. The content of an opinion is always expressed in language.
3. An opinion is always in the final analysis the opinion of an individual.
4. Those who express opinions in discussion must expect these to be subjected to scrutiny to determine whether or not they are correct or true; this means that the whole apparatus of evaluating truth claims that has been an obsession of Western philosophy since its origins can be activated in the discussion.
5. Opinions can be investigated atomistically, that is, one can abstract them—without remainder and without falsifying them—from the context of actions and other opinions in which they are usually embedded, and treat each one in isolation.
6. Participants in the discussion are anonymous; they do not speak *as* bearers of any social roles or offices or with any special authority, but always as naked individuals. The opinions discussed are treated ahistorically, as if it were irrelevant what the person who holds the opinion might have said or done in the past.
7. “Ethical judgments” formulate a particular “moral ought” which prescribes once and for all how each individual should act and trumps all other practical considerations.
8. Political philosophy is a part of applied ethics; that is, in discussion ethical judgments are clarified and justified, and they are then applied in the political sphere.

As I said the above is an ideal type, that is, a constructed paradigm which is taken to have importance because it gives understanding both of cases that conform to it and of cases that deviate. It is not intended as

a description of any reality. Nevertheless, this paradigm seems to me to provide such a distorted view of anything that could reasonably be called “politics,” that it is not a useful starting point for any kind of illuminating analysis. Roughly speaking, each of the eight theses is either false or so misleading that it might as well be false. Traditional philosophy was utterly fixated on the search for a single fundamental concept the analysis of which would allow one to decipher a whole area of human experience, and for a very wide range of human activities philosophers thought they had discovered an Archimedean point in the concept of a “belief” or an “opinion.” I would like to suggest that this traditional approach might in some ways stand in the way of a proper understanding of politics. In contrast to the traditional views, I would like to propose two theses. First, if one thinks it necessary to isolate a single political concept that was purportedly more central than others, one would be well advised to take as basic not “belief” or “opinion” but “action” or the “context of action.” Political judgments are not made individually one by one, but always stand as parts of larger sets of beliefs and judgments, and a political judgment is always embedded in a context of *action*.⁴ A political judgment

⁴It has often been noted that the term “political judgment” is ambiguous in English as between:

- a) an act of judging made either by a person or a group about what courses of collective action are desirable.

For instance, the members of my university faculty can discuss our curriculum and conclude our discussion by judging that we ought to reduce the number of examinations we require of our undergraduates. This is an action we take at a particular time, i.e., on a particular day in a particular meeting, and it is an action which may turn out to have been a good idea or not.

- b) a linguistic entity expressing an act of judging.

For instance, “The Faculty Board has decided to reduce the number of examinations” or simply “The number of examinations will be reduced.”

- c) the general capacity to make judgments.
- d) the ability to make *good* judgments.

I wish to suggest that it is a mistake simply to collapse (a) and (b) because I can make a kind of very rudimentary action-guiding judgment without it being the case that I would endorse a specific linguistically formulated proposition. *A fortiori* I can make a judgment without being consciously guided by a particular linguistically formulated proposition. There are, I wish to contend, two correlative mistakes here. One is to overintellectualize human action, to assume that in order to act I (or we) must have a specific belief or set of beliefs in mind which guide us. Certainly, we are familiar with a phenomenon which we find it natural to describe by attributing to it a proto-judgment, that is, by saying: the cat is treating you as a friend/enemy. This should be taken to indicate to us a certain dimension of very primitive human possibilities, ways of judging that are in some sense prior to linguistic formulation. The other correlative mistake is to overlook the role of language in constituting most human

is itself specifically directed at focusing, guiding and orienting future action; expressing, or even entertaining, such a judgment is performing an action.⁵ Second, “context of action” would not be a concept that could serve as an essential definition of politics in the traditional sense in which philosophers have sought such a definition. At best, “context of action” is an open concept with indeterminate contours, and boundaries that can expand and contract depending on a variety of other factors.

It is by no means an unimportant feature of politics that it is a kind of interaction between concrete individuals and groups that have different powers and abilities. These individuals and groups act, try to preempt, counter, or control the actions of others and discuss the rationale for and the actual consequences of pursuing a variety of possible and actual courses of action, appealing to general principles and shared assumptions, blustering, threatening, cajoling and arguing to assert themselves and to further particular policies and orientations toward the world. The people engaged in the discussion are also not anonymous or abstract tokens of universal rationality, but persons who have individual histories, and track records of previously held opinions, actions, and associations that are to some degree known to the others.⁶ Particularly in the case of politicians

situations, especially those which display any kind of complexity or sophistication. Thus, at the end of World War II the Allies decided to grant to the Kingdom of Italy, as it then was, the status of “non-allied co-belligerent” in the war against Hitler. The cat may judge that you are a friend without entertaining an appropriate linguistically formulated belief, but it is hard to see how anyone could make any particular judgment about the advisability of granting or withholding the status of “non-allied co-belligerent” without having something like human language. This, in turn, does not mean one must have a *specific* linguistic item “non-allied co-belligerent” in order to grant or withhold this status—in fact in English we do not have a *single word* for that—but it does mean we must have a sufficiently rich stock of appropriate general words to express what we mean. In short, from the fact that *some* linguistic expression is necessary for more sophisticated forms of human interaction to be possible, one must not draw the conclusion that human behavior can in some sense be reduced to beliefs/language. It is important to recognize both that action and language are connected and that there is a potential looseness of fit between the two. We can have collective hostility to you—to have this enmity it is perhaps necessary that we have *some* linguistic means at our disposal; but it is not the case either that we absolutely must use *this* particular language, or that in order to act in a particular way, we need exactly to have had some particular, antecedently formulated, linguistically shaped belief in mind to guide us. There is a residual gap or space between language and action, an indeterminateness, which nothing can overcome.

⁵See John Dewey, *The Late Works, 1925–1953*, vol. 4: *1929: The Quest for Certainty*, in *John Dewey*, ed. Jo An Boydston (Southern Illinois University Press, 1988), and *Human Nature and Conduct* (Random House, 1930).

⁶This is obviously directed at the views held by John Rawls and by Jürgen Habermas, who in one way or another believe one can orient oneself in the world of politics by analyzing what would be the object of consensus in an idealized discussion conducted by agents who are deprived of any knowledge of their own empirical singularity or of the contingent historical situation.

who are known magnitudes the possibility of recalling their past actions, the positions they took, and the arguments they used can throw a surprisingly long shadow on a present discussion. This means that agents involved in the interaction will need to think about the consistency of their commitments over time, and about reasons they could publicly give for having changed their views (when they have done so)—reasons that do not do them too much discredit. Thus, everyone present at the Washington dinner party Sir Christopher describes will have known that Richard Perle had been a staunch opponent of any form of arms control agreement with the Soviet Union during the Cold War, and was closely associated in the 1990s with a group called “The Project for the New American Century.”⁷ This group elaborated a plan for U.S. domination of the world by making use of the uncontested military superiority of the United States over any possible constellation of conventional enemies that was one result of the collapse of the Soviet Union. One of the central planks of the program put forward by the Project for the New American Century was the proposal to “discourage” allies, for example the United Kingdom, from acquiring the military capacity to operate independently of the United States. If Richard Perle one day presented himself as an apostle of peace and advocate of genuinely universal disarmament, this deviation from his earlier position would at the very least require him to have some articulable reasons ready to explain why he had changed his mind, or how his new position could be made compatible with the one with which he is so strongly associated. That would not be impossible, but it would be an extra rhetorical task he would have to discharge that might put him at a slight disadvantage in certain discussions. In general participants in a political discussion have internalized at least some minimal historical knowledge about the other participants to such an extent that the past is an essential integral component of the present situation, and one cannot understand what is taking place without knowledge of this historical dimension.

When Richard Perle says to Sir Christopher Meyer that Britain “must” choose, he is not merely floating for disinterested consideration a speculative hypothesis about historical or contextual necessity, in the way in which a biologist might say that all living things must eventually die. Rather, particularly in view of Richard Perle’s position as a professional politician and his past, which strongly suggests that he is a bit of a bully, in saying that Britain must choose Perle is most probably trying to influence Sir Christopher’s attitude, that is, trying to bring it about that Britain *does* choose. Even *saying* this makes it harder for Britain not

⁷On Richard Perle and the neoconservatives, see also James Mann, *The Rise of the Vulcans* (Viking Penguin 2004), and Stefan Halper and Jonathan Clarke, *America Alone* (Cambridge University Press, 2004).

to choose, and given Perle's connections he is, and is known to be, in a position to make it even harder if he wishes. Western philosophers have historically focused on the analysis of beliefs or opinions, have construed these on the model of detached vision, and have discussed obsessively the conditions under which such beliefs could be considered to represent the existing world correctly. It is not false to think of a political judgment as a belief, but this is an abstraction, an artificial isolation of one element or component or aspect from a wider nexus of actions and action-related attitudes, habits, and institutional arrangements, within which alone the judgment (finally) makes sense.

In addition, although to express the view that "Britain must choose" might look like a simple prediction, it can also be seen as a kind of threat. What Britain "must" do is connected to what it "can" do, and what it politically "can" do is not anything picked out by logical or physical necessity, but by what it can reasonably be expected to be able to do without having to pay an exorbitantly high price. The neoconservatives in the Bush administration, however, who wish Britain to choose, are also in a position to impose a price that would make failure to choose unreasonable. In saying that Britain must choose, Richard Perle is perhaps reminding British diplomats of this, signaling his intention to exact this price if necessary and seeking thereby to bring it about that they choose. Although in very many political contexts stating what looks to be a prediction is actually changing the situation, this does not mean that no prediction is possible in such cases, merely that it must be approached with more care than one needs to use in more straightforward cases of prediction.

It is however by no means the case that attempts to engage in self-fulfilling prophecies will necessarily succeed; an interventive prediction may even backfire, so that what is intended as a self-fulfilling prophecy ends up undermining itself. Diplomats, politicians, and national populations can be highly counter-suggestible, and precisely putting this pressure on Britain may convince a majority of the population that it is best not to allow oneself to be bullied: if choose we must, let it be the EU, where at least we have an institutionally secured set of powers to participate in decision-making. Whether this reaction of defiance can be maintained or not depends on a number of different factors. In particular it depends on the answers to two questions:

- a. What means of coercion does the extortionist actually have at his disposal? What could he in principle do to us?
- b. What is the likelihood that the extortionist will actually apply the sanctions he threatens us with?

To the start with the first question, it should be noted that in many cases the effectiveness of a threat depends to some extent on the attitude and

reaction of the person threatened. The blackmailer's threat to disclose the contents of some of my correspondence loses its force if I become indifferent to the publication of the correspondence. States, of course, have at their disposal means of extreme coercion the effectiveness of which cannot be blunted simply by a change in our attitudes, but it seems fair to assume that in February 2001 Perle did not seriously envisage a series of direct military actions, or even indirect acts of subversion against Great Britain, and, in fact if he had been known concretely to have envisaged any such thing that in itself would have changed the situation drastically. Short of military intervention or subversion, however, it would seem that the U.S. government has three possible instruments to hand. First, it can impose various kinds of economic and commercial sanctions, try to destabilize the currency, etc.; second, it can refuse to supply Britain with advanced military equipment of various kinds; and third, it can try to isolate us diplomatically and politically. Economic sanctions might be very painful, but their effectiveness would depend partly on how much we were willing to stand. It is at least arguable that we need the most advanced military systems only if we wish to operate as junior partners in joint operations with the United States, so if we were willing to give up some pretensions to Great Power status, we could easily dispense with them. Finally, the idea that the United States would be in a position to isolate the UK politically was a bit of a joke even in 2001. After all, Blair's reasons for supporting the invasion of Iraq seem partly to have been his need to cut a vivid figure on the international stage and accumulate enough influence with the United States to use its power to fuel his religious fantasies about a never-ending war against Evil. Sources close to Blair, however, have occasionally hinted that another important part of his motivation was his fear that if Britain didn't join the United States, Washington would be so isolated politically that the U.S. government would not be able to control its own paranoia and would run amok. So a threat to isolate Britain was not to be taken terribly seriously. On closer inspection, then, none of the three instruments then seems utterly irresistible if the UK could keep its nerve.

As far as the second of the two questions is concerned, Perle probably assumes, as General de Gaulle did, that if really forced to choose, there is no question but that Britain would choose a basically Atlantic orientation whatever the damage to our relation with Europe. It is part of Perle's calculation to pretend that he would prefer Britain to be with the European Union rather than a neutral between Washington and the EU, but that pretense is a bluff.

Sir Christopher, as an experienced diplomat, sees through most of what Perle is up to without much difficulty precisely because he does not take the content of what he asserts in isolation and at face value as a set of propositions to be evaluated for their truth or falsity. Rather he sees

them as specific actions in a particular context, and he can interpret them correctly as attempts to influence British foreign policy in a particular way *because* he knows Perle's own history, and that of the groups with which he is most closely associated, and thus he can locate Perle rather exactly in the landscape of contemporary American politics. Meyer, for his part, is trying to bring it about that Perle sees the world in a certain way, in particular that Perle comes to assume that what is politically important is the context Blair intended. Why, though, should Perle and Co. be at all interested in the context Blair *intended*? His policies might well have harmed U.S. interests (as interpreted by Perle) without intending to do so, and Perle might believe that Blair ought to have been able to see that this would be the case. Is politics about intentions or real results? Doesn't the answer to this question depend on a still further context?

Saying that "Britain must choose" is performing an action which in the context also articulates the attitude of a particular group, the neo-conservatives. This context is partly constituted by a series of historical and institutional facts which one must take account of if one wishes to understand the statement. If one wishes, one can isolate the pure content of this political judgment and formulate it, as it were, as an abstract prediction. This might be a perfectly reasonable and useful thing to do for some purposes, and unobjectionable as long as one remembers that one is artificially extracting the content from a wider context in which it is actually embedded, and as long as one does not forget that what parts of the context are relevant will depend on the particular purpose at hand. This, however, it seems to me, is sufficient to undermine the traditional conception which I outlined above, in which politics is understood on the model of a quasi-academic discussion.

There are two rather different things the term "political judgment" can mean. First of all, it can refer to a judgment made about a certain domain of the world. Just as a chemical judgment refers to chemical processes, and a biological judgment to the properties of biological systems, a "political judgment" could be construed as a judgment *about* politics, that is about affairs of state, relations of power, the way in which collective human action is coordinated, or however else one wanted to specify the domain of "politics," say as opposed to whatever one wanted to oppose it to. Second, one could speak of a political judgment as a judgment not about a certain domain, but rather as a judgment about almost any domain whatever that as a judgment has a certain character. To say that a judgment "has a political character," however, means that someone can *look at it* in a certain way, namely as an action with implications for further instances or forms of collective human action. So Truman's conversation with Stalin at the Potsdam Conference about the successful testing of the first atomic bomb was a conversation *about* a particular topic, namely a

certain experiment with explosive radioactive materials, but it was clearly also a conversation that had a political character, since the point of it was to intimidate Stalin. A historian's description of the Potsdam Conference will contain any number of political judgments in the first sense, but since it is possible to see these judgments, like the judgments Sir Christopher and Richard Perle express in retrospectively interpreting the meeting of the Council of Europe in Nice, under the aspect of their relation to the possibilities of collective human action, they can also be considered "political judgments" in the second sense. There is, to be completely explicit about this, no reason why an external observer might not wish to look for a political aspect even of actions which are considered by those who perform them to be "unpolitical," just as there is no reason in principle why I should be disbarred from judging the way the man behind the counter in the post office weighs my letter "from an aesthetic point of view," even though he has no nonutilitarian intentions. To be sure, if we do this—if we look at the postal worker as if he were a mime or performance artist of some kind—we might not come much closer to an understanding of what he is doing, at any event in *one* sense of "understanding." "Understanding" itself, however, is not usually an end in itself, but a means to something else, usually to some kind of action.

As I have tried to emphasize, political judgments do not generally occur as isolated individual statements, but rather as part of sets of beliefs and judgments that are interconnected with forms of individual and institutional action. These sets are Janus-faced, exhibiting two aspects. One aspect makes them look a bit like predictions; the other makes them look like value judgments. They are in fact both at the same time, and regardless of the fact that it might be "in principle" or "logically" or "analytically" possible to distinguish them, in fact these two aspects are so interconnected that in actual political practice it is essential to see them together. In addition, the prediction-aspect and the evaluation-aspect of systems of political judgment are not like the usual models we have and use of either simple prediction or simple evaluation. I have mentioned one important way in which they diverge from our standard models of prediction, namely that they are what some philosophers call "reflexive," that is, they can have a potentially self-fulfilling or for that matter self-undermining property. I would now like to say something about political judgments in their evaluative aspect.

The usual model that is used for classing or grading is one in which I have a set of fixed standards and apply them to candidates for evaluation. The example that is often given is grading eggs or apples.⁸ We assume that

⁸See J. O. Urmson, "On Grading," in *Mind*, vol. 59 (1950), pp. 145–69. This (pre-Wittgensteinian) analysis is still useful as an account of our everyday assumptions.

there are firm and fixed criteria or standards for designating something a “Grade A” apple: it has a certain size, color, perhaps a certain degree of ripeness and freshness, it must lack certain disfigurements, etc. The standards will be established relative to a certain fixed human purpose. Grade A apples will be those that have properties which make them especially highly suited to those human purposes. These criteria will themselves not be absolutely precise, and their application to individual cases will rarely be beyond reasonable disagreement,⁹ but one of the usual assumptions we make when discussing this kind of grading is that the process of deciding on the criteria to be used, and the process of classifying individual instances, are separate and distinct. The reason for this is that the whole point of grading things like apples, eggs, timber, or undergraduates is to introduce predictability into life. Grading is supposed to allow us to know what we are getting. When the grader is classifying, he or she *accepts* and applies pre-given criteria; a grader does not change the goalposts while the game is going on. If this happened, it would defeat the whole point of grading. That, at any rate, is the conception implicit in the usual model.

Simple classification or grading of the kind described above, however, is exactly what does *not* characteristically happen in politics. In politics simple grading plays an extremely important but distinctly subordinate role. We collect and use statistics on crime, employment, productivity, health, but we also constantly question the way the statistics are put together. More generally, political action takes place in an arena in which the standards for evaluating what is “success,” what is a good idea, what is a desirable outcome, are themselves always changing and always in principle up for renegotiation. Thus, on 1 May 2003 George W. Bush announced that the war in Iraq had ended in “victory” for U.S. forces, and very clearly presented this as a vindication of his policy of invasion in the interests of “regime change.” In conventional terms this was clearly a Grade A military “victory”: the field army of the enemy was decisively defeated and dispersed, the command structure utterly dissolved, and the national territory occupied. Even the further goal of “regime change” was attained. Whatever one might think of the political situation in Iraq after 1 May 2003, the Baathist Party was clearly no longer in control of the apparatus of state power. Is it so obvious, however, that this automatically counts as a political success?

The prospects of a stable democracy in Iraq do not look very rosy, but then one would have to be extraordinarily naïve to think that this was an important part of the motivation for the invasion anyway. If the point

⁹If Wittgenstein is right, this is a philosophical, not a practical point. Even apparently fixed everyday “evaluation” is in fact indeterminate, so our everyday *view* of it is incorrect. In politics the real situation is revealed for all to see.

really was to prevent the establishment of any political agency in the Middle East that was independent of the United States, then a democratic Iraq would be a potential danger anyway, because it might at some point be tempted to steer an independent course. So the complete destruction of the country as a viable society capable of setting its own goals and acting on them effectively would be to that extent a success, although one the perception of which would have to be managed carefully given the claims made to justify the war. On the other hand, the price paid for the military victory was the weakening of the UN, the diplomatic isolation of the United States, a split in NATO, the generation of thousands of new recruits to a political agenda hostile to the United States,¹⁰ and a significant drain on the U.S. economy because major allies refused to do what they had done in the First Gulf War, namely foot the entire bill for the war. Is it clear that “regime change” in this sense will be the realization of a good or will contribute to “the good life”? Whose good life? Is it clear that it has furthered broad U.S. interests or the wider interests of the populations in Europe, the Middle East, and the rest of the world? Was Richard Perle really giving good advice when he counseled invasion? Political success is always subject to reevaluation in the light of changing circumstances and changing overall conceptions of “the good life.” There is no reason to think that discussions of what constitutes a good life will ever, certainly not within any finite period of time, end in the kind of normatively binding consensus some philosophers have expected.¹¹ One thing that seems to have happened in the case of the Second Gulf War is that as a result of action large numbers of people changed the concrete understanding of what would count as “success” that they antecedently had had. This is not an unusual outcome.¹²

Is there, then, nothing but shifting processes of political judgment that comprise changing predictions and infinitely contestable evaluations? Surely, though, one might argue, there are limits to the malleability of concepts like “success,” a “good outcome,” a “desirable result.” At any

¹⁰Of course, the *main* self-declared political aim of Al-Qaeda is an end to the stationing of U.S. troops in Saudi Arabia. See *Messages to the World: The Statements of Osama bin Laden*, ed. Bruce Lawrence (Verso, 2005), or *What Does Al-Qaeda Want?* ed. Robert O. Marlin IV (North Atlantic Books, 2004); see also Farhad Khosrokhavar, *Quand Al-Qaïda parle* (Grasset, 2006).

¹¹Again this is directed primarily against Rawls and Habermas.

¹²One of the most deeply illuminating discussions of the differences between everyday grading and the more complex forms of interaction between classing, acting, and changing the standards of classing is that to be found in Hegel, particularly in his discussion of the difference between “*Verstand*” and “*Vernunft*.” See *Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften*, in *Werke in zwanzig Bänden*, ed. Eva Moldenhauer and Karl Markus Michel (Suhrkamp, 1970), vol. 8, pp. 1–168, or the briefer treatment in *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, vol. 3 of the same collection, pp. 68–81.

rate, life itself, biological survival, sets certain limits to what any of us can construe as a “good life.” The phenomenon of martyrdom familiar in the West since antiquity, and the use of coordinated suicide bombing attacks since World War II, means that not even the human desire for self-preservation can be taken unquestioned as the basis for political valuation.¹³ For as long as humans are capable of a moral and social, and not a merely biological, understanding of “the good life,” martyrdom, voluntary self-immolation, and suicide attack will remain as human possibilities. This continued openness of “success” (or “the good life”) to reevaluation is not, I think, merely a local property of democratic politics, although it is a feature of politics in general that comes most vividly to the surface in democracies. Evaluation in politics will not always be simple, and is almost never definitive. To be sure, if you let yourself be killed as a martyr or kill yourself as a suicide bomber, you close the context for yourself by this action, but what your action means for those of us who survive, and how we will judge it, is still an open question *for us*, which we will try to answer, if we find it pressing enough, by the usual series of complicated acts of interpretation.

Ever since, at the latest, Thucydides, πρόνοια, the ability correctly to foresee what was likely to happen, has been valued as one of the most important virtues of the politician. This includes not merely the ability to predict or foresee what will happen but also to foresee what *will seem good*, both to oneself and more importantly to “effective” others, that is, to those whose views about what is good or satisfactory count politically.¹⁴ When the war has been lost catastrophically, which policy will have more appeal, one based on a call for *revanche*, or on a call for lasting peace at almost any price? The combination of an ability to foresee or predict and an ability to evaluate is not the only important political capacity *tout court*. Obviously, other important traits are persistence, discipline, resourcefulness, the ability to persuade and organize others, etc.; but I would like specifically to mention a further, particularly important cognitive-practical ability. There is a distinct ability of practical imagination, inventiveness, or creativity, of coming up with new possibilities, or seeing new possibilities or constructiveness, which is very important in politics.¹⁵

¹³See *Making Sense of Suicide Missions*, ed. Diego Gambetta (Oxford University Press, 2005), esp. the chapters by Hopgood (pp. 43–76) and Gambetta (pp. 259–99).

¹⁴I mean “effective” here in the sense in which economists speak of “effective demand.”

¹⁵I’m suggesting here a parallel to the distinction sometimes made by aestheticians between the “genius” who is able to produce works of art that deviate in a both original and interesting way, and the critic or person of taste who is capable of judging works. Kant’s discussion of taste and genius in *Kritik der Urteilskraft* is the obvious classic treatment.

I mean by this, for instance, the sort of ability exhibited by those who organized the attacks on the Pentagon in Washington and the World Trade Center in New York. Someone had to have the utterly ingenious idea of construing civilian passenger aircraft as missiles with suicide hijackers as pilots who would fly them so as to destroy large buildings. More important, however, than this exercise of technical imagination was the kind of *political* imagination that seems to have been at work. We don't know much, or at any rate I don't know much, about the actual planning of these attacks, but to the extent to which one can infer back from the actual results of what was a very well-organized operation to the intentions of those who planned it, it seems likely that the planners knew they were about to inflict a deep narcissistic wound on the American psyche, which the population would neither comprehend nor be able to tolerate. The form that reflection took after the attacks—the frantic attempt to answer the question “Why do ‘they’ hate ‘us’?”—was sufficiently incoherent to indicate that a deep nerve had been touched. It would not have been difficult, then, to expect the Bush regime to embark on a course of internal repression and foreign military adventure so wild, destructive, and dangerous that international public opinion would shift decisively against the United States, which is what has happened. So far—as of November 2006—this strategy, if in fact it was a strategy and not a mere series of accidents, has been working like a well-engineered Swiss watch. Viewed from the outside, the plan also seems to exhibit great subtlety in utilizing American blind spots—the gross ignorance on the part of the population about the rest of the world and their extremely limited ability to see themselves and their actions as others see them—to subvert U.S. military power and cause it to discharge itself in politically self-destructive ways. To come up with this kind of plan requires not merely political judgment, but inventiveness of a high order. The kind of imaginativeness I have in mind might or might not be well grounded, that is, the plan might or might not work; one might or might not approve of the results. An agent may well be capable of coming up with a variety of new suggestions none of which is any good. That is, as I would express it, someone may have political imagination without political judgment. And of course, people may well have both political imagination and judgment without also having a moral sense, or at any rate without exercising that sense.¹⁶

¹⁶One might say that there are three “genuine” dimensions of politics:

- a) inventiveness—finding new things that work
- b) prediction, foresight
- c) trying actively to change people's conception of the good

One of the most interesting aspects of the events of the 11th of September 2001 has always seemed to me to be the fact that the attacks were carried out wordlessly as far as the international media were concerned. There was no reading out of a set of demands in front of television cameras, no explanations, no public political announcements of any kind, no group immediately fell all over itself to try to lay claim to this tremendous coup. Through their actions themselves the perpetrators expressed a rather clear political judgment about a civilization based on militarism and economic exploitation *without saying a word*.

and (at least) one very prominent but debased dimension:

- d) spin doctoring—trying to cause people to think that outcomes are good by certain accepted standards, which are not, or trying to confuse people about the standards being used.