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## Politics and Reason

A presidential campaign is a fine spectacle. If it is no more than that, for whatever reasons, it is time to ask why. When the republic was being arranged, the Federalist papers burrowed deeply into regions of political thought and meanings. Nearly two centuries later, the ordained rhythms of politics seem an end in themselves, concerned with a transition of parties and power but not a transition of reason or purpose. It is a troubling curtain raiser on our third century.

The function of elective politics is to choose leadership. This is a choice to be grounded on substance rather than on electronic and acoustic images. The characters and abilities of the potential leaders enter into making the choice, but it is the substance that defines the quality of the choice. What are the terms on which an affluent and technologically powerful nation proposes to conduct its affairs in a troubled world? For that matter, are affluence and power, together with the means to secure and preserve them, to be the continued goals of our public policies and the measure of effective leadership? If *not* affluence and power, then what? In the scramble for votes, who is going to speak of such matters, and who will listen?

It may be said fairly that this is a brimming century of information and knowledge. Science, technology, and humanism have all spread a feast of information before us for the taking. Our comprehension of the human condition and its dilemmas is not yet what it should be, but there is no denying that we know enough to grasp the dimensions of our responsibilities and the consequences of trifling with them. If the turmoil of the past decade has resulted only in giving issue politics a permanent bad name, we are in trouble. At the margins of one's memory there is an echo of Adlai Stevenson's advice to a Princeton senior class: to touch the truth and feel the hem of heaven.

For at least two decades, American science with good reason has argued for something resembling a national science policy framework. Some of the elements of such policy are now written into recent legislation. Even so, it seems more likely that the future directions of science and technology in the United States will be shaped by the working premises, values, and general mind-set of the country. If the accepted proposition were to be, for instance, the unconstrained economic growth is the consensus goal, then science and technology would be called upon to support it. If, instead, the common sense is that compulsive and unqualified growth will lead to new disorders and the exhaustion of both resources and human tolerance, then science and technology would have a very different agenda. How does knowledge get worked into so fundamental a choice as this?

It is a very large and real question. Rufus Miles, in a provocative book,\* argues that we are close not only to the limits of growth but to the limits of political solutions. A hundred years ago Thomas Huxley saw what was coming and observed that "Size is not grandeur and territory does not make a nation. The great question is *what are you going to do with all this? What is to be the end of which this will be the means?*"

There is still time for a politics of reason. It has been in fashion to parade the costly failures of knowledge. Too little has been said of its indispensability. To pin the future simplistically to the idea that more is bound to be better, without recycling Huxley's questions, is to ignore the profound dilemmas in the relationship between power and responsibility. Nor is it enough to be content with assurances of the future health and exuberance of science and technology, apart from addressing their uses. This is what "science and public policy" ought to mean to us: a reach for higher ground in the partnership of knowledge with governance.—WILLIAM D. CAREY

\*R. E. Miles, Jr., *Awakening from the American Dream* (Universe Books, New York, 1976).