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Politics: Not an End in Itself

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“As such, politics has eclipsed its primary purpose—namely, to provide the means by which people can seek out and, in turn, live good lives, lives that have nothing to do with politics.”

This June, Cato Institute’s Aaron Ross Powell wrote, “I’m suspicious of people who have few or no interests outside of politics [b]ecause the only reason we should be interested in politics at all is to figure out how to make it so we someday no longer need to be interested in politics.” It is a passage reminiscent of John Adams’ oft-quoted “I must study politics and war, that our sons may have liberty to study mathematics and philosophy,” a sentence the future president would write in a 1780 letter to his wife, Abigail.

Powell’s statement comes at a time when many of us are quick to sense that politics has become far too present and intrusive into our daily lives. It has seeped out of the areas to which it should be confined, now coloring nearly every facet of society, from ballet to professional baseball. As such, politics has eclipsed its primary purpose—namely, to provide the means by which people can seek out and, in turn, live good lives, lives that have nothing to do with politics.

Just as in a healthy society, one does not see soldiers stationed on street corners (the military seeping out of its barracks and bases and inserting itself into the daily affairs of the society that its placement elsewhere exists to protect), a well-functioning state is similarly free of its politics being ever-present and all-consuming.

Writing home to his parents in Mobile, Alabama at the height of the Vietnam War, a 24-year-old captain in the United States Marine Corps by the name of Rodney R. Chastant explained why he fought: “To make the world safe for ice skating, department stores and lamp shades.” He wrote this line in response to an apology from his mother in a previous letter, where she had feared she was boring her son by recounting the mundane details of daily life back in the United States. He would continue: “No, Mom, these things aren’t trivial to me. They are vitally important to me. Those are the truly important things...” So it is not so much that trips to the store and catching buses were to be leveraged in service of at least the stated reason for the American project of the war in Vietnam (i.e., grand pronouncements about the ideological superiority of democracy and capitalism over autocracy and socialism); rather, the war was a necessary trial to be endured so as to be able to enjoy all the sublunary things that populate a worthwhile life.

Chastant’s letter also brings to mind a line from the musical *Les Misérables*, from the Act I Number “Red and Black”: “Do we fight for the right/To a night at the opera now?” Whether when toiling in politics or in warfare, underpinning it all is the idea, though sometimes obscured by the tumult of the process, that some state of affairs ought to be reached where to grind on in political or military exercises would be rendered less necessary.

Now, this is not to argue that politics or war ought always to be leveraged in service of reaching an end point characterized by the absence of strife altogether. As I have discussed previously, achieving a state of leisure entirely free of commitments or striving is hardly desirable; in fact, it can amount to a dystopia of its own. In a way, this is what Senator Ben Sasse was getting at when he affirmed the importance of both work and leisure in a 2017 interview: “We’re meant to live a life of gratitude by doing something meaningful. We’re meant to get to the evening and get some of that leisure or recreation or fun, food, and wine, and fellowship with friends, [while] looking back at the fence you built that day or the field you farmed or the factory you co-labored with or the app that you designed. You’re meant to look back at that and say, ‘I produced something today.’”

Could politics constitute that “doing [of] something meaningful”? Perhaps, and it might also be hailed as a conducive medium for exercising certain talents, whether in oratory, writing, or persuasion more broadly. However, it is likely preferable—whenever possible—to bypass exerting one’s efforts on politics, the intermediary, in favor of more intrinsically choice-worthy ends, such as some of those enumerated by Adams or with any number of other similar (and perhaps more currently fashionable) counterparts. These said meaningful activities, following Senator Sasse, are also meant to be punctuated by periods of concomitant recreation. (1)

Although some of us might be tempted to misconstrue the frequently cited Aristotelian dictum that “man is a political animal,” as Matt McManus noted to me recently, what Aristotle means there by politics is far different from “the modernist conception of politics as factionalism in the pursuit of one’s economic interests.” Rather, it means something closer to a situatedness in a family or community, the sort of living well in concert with others with which our modern politics frequently comes into conflict.

All the while, far too many of us, particularly among the younger generations, are quick to declare that we want to live lives in service of various causes from “improving the tenor of American politics” to “promoting equity,” insipid utterances redolent of past calls to arms such as President Woodrow Wilson’s claim about the need for the world to “be made safe for democracy.” These are phrases that imply that an individual’s highest calling is to make himself an instrument of a political cause, the sort of thinking that causes him to disassociate himself from those who hold different views, reject considering developments that come into conflict with the tenets of his favored ideological project, as well as possibly succumbing entirely to the activist way of life and all the immoderation that entails. The first step in resisting all of this is to remember that the objective is not to make the world safe for politics; rather, politics exists to make the world safe for engaging in a variety of pursuits that have nothing to do with politics. (2)

The unfortunate reality, though, is that those obsessed with imbuing everything with politics have already made it all but impossible for the rest of us to ignore this means-saturated world they have so thoroughly succeeded in creating.