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## Comment on Galston Paper: Comment

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## COMMENT ON GALSTON PAPER

GORDON S. WOOD\*

It is very difficult to comment on a paper with which one agrees so much. Galston's argument is so cogent and so clearly and forcefully expressed that it completely persuades. But there are some interesting issues raised by his paper.

He spends a good deal of time showing how much the founding fathers had departed from the classics. That he should have to do so suggests to me some of the problems we have in discussing this relationship between the American revolutionaries and the classical past. Somehow or other our expectations have gotten skewed: we think the revolutionaries should be more classical than they were in fact, and we are surprised when they turn out to be so modern. Yet if we reverse our expectations and start with the assumption that the founding fathers were very modern eighteenth-century men who were acquainted with the classics and used them in their thinking, then we are bound to be impressed with the extent to which the classics influenced them.

Compared to later generations, not to mention the present, the late eighteenth century was the great neo-classical age of American history. Classical influence was everywhere—in the names of towns and streets, like Syracuse and Troy; in the designation of political institutions, like the senates and capitol; in the political symbols, like the goddess Liberty, the numerous Latin mottoes, and the Great Seal of the United States with its *novo ordo seclorum* from Virgil and its Roman numerals, MDCCLXXVI, for greater dignity; in the poetry and the songs, like "Hail Columbia"; in the classical pseudonyms of writers, like "Publius"; and of course in the endless proliferation of Greek and Roman temples. But this classical influence did not run deep, and the antique spirit that inspired these things was being lost even as they were being created.

There was one substantial element from the classical past, however, that some of the founding fathers cherished, and Galston has shrewdly put his finger on it. It is what he calls the "inequality of capacity to fulfill the duties of public office." They took seriously the idea that public officeholding ought to be in accord with what Jefferson called "The Roman principle": it was an obligation of rank, a sacrifice of private happiness by

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those of talent and presumably leisure and independent means for the sake of the public. It was this Ciceronian imperative that led Washington to serve as commander-in-chief and to try to serve as president without salary, and that led Franklin in the Philadelphia Convention to propose that members of the executive branch "receive no salary, stipend, fee or reward whatsoever for their services."

But this classical imperative could never really be fulfilled because most of the American aristocracy or gentry never had the wherewithal to live up to it; it was the perennial problem of early America's aristocracy. The result was that most of the American gentry, not being as wealthy as Washington or Franklin, had to exploit their government offices for personal gain, or, like Hamilton, periodically had to retreat to their law offices in order to make ends meet. In either case they did violence to the classical standards most knew they should be living up to. In the end it was this weakness of the American aristocracy that more than anything else eventually turned public office in America into a salaried occupation like any other—a phenomenon that stunned every early nineteenth-century foreign visitor that came to these shores. As our recent debates over raises of the salaries of congressmen suggest, we still have some lingering notion that public officeholding ought to be something of a sacrifice, that it is not to be equated completely with all other professions or occupations. To that degree, I suppose, we still have some remnant of classicism hanging about.

Thus the idea that we today can restore some sort of classical politics to our public life strikes me as utterly chimerical. That does not mean, however, that classical politics, as Galston makes very clear, cannot be "productive in illuminating some perennial problems of politics, in helping us to improve our own self-understanding, and in presenting an alternative against which the distinctive features of modern liberal constitutional democracy can emerge more clearly." The distinction he draws between a structural appeal and a literal appeal to the classics is powerful and realistic; it cuts through a lot of the inflated rhetoric we hear these days about the possibilities of recapturing "civic republicanism" for American politics.

I would like to go beyond Galston, however, and push his objections to a literal appeal to the classics a little further than he does. As a historian, I see the issues discussed here in this symposium and elsewhere in law and political science journals, differently from the political philosophers and legal theorists. All of them seem to speak and write as if we had more freedom and choice in the matter than we do. They seem to suggest that people can actually be talked into restoring classical politics

or even aspects of classical politics to American political life. I suppose intellectuals and scholars have to believe that such things can happen, that their ideas can matter in this way; or else they could never muster the energy to think and write as they do. But historians are blessed with a different obligation: they do not have as their primary purpose the changing of our present minds on behalf of a cause; instead, their principal purpose is to describe and explain what happened in the past. If their written history should have the effect of changing our minds about the present and future, all well and good, but that is not, or at least should not, be the main goal of writing history.

People's thoughts, their ideas and their culture, do not change simply because some intellectuals would like them to. The founding fathers in 1787-88 did not argue the way they did merely because they had read this or that book or recalled this or that classical theorist. They were involved in polemical debates in a highly charged atmosphere amidst rapidly shifting social and political circumstances. They were not entirely free to say or even to think what they wanted; they were limited by the cultural and social worlds in which they lived. And they were not free to control the effects or consequences of what they did think and say. Indeed, the democratization of mind that took place over the decades following the formation of the Constitution was not, could never have been, a mere matter of changing opinion. This momentous change in the culture was undergirded and driven by an equally momentous social revolution—a revolution marked by the collapse of traditional social hierarchies and the emergence of new kinds of men and property. The founding fathers were carried along by these changes even as they contributed to them. That is the relentless lesson of history: that the historical process never works out quite the way the participants intended and everyone to one degree or another is its victim.

There are, in other words, certain determining elements that we participants have very little control over. Classical men called these elements fate or the gods, and we call them social and cultural circumstances. We are free to struggle with these circumstances, even to change them, but we are not free to do anything we wish with them. Much of the time in fact we are only dimly aware of these limiting circumstances. We may long for a different kind of politics, but we are not going to be able easily to create it in the face of these circumstances. And whatever reforms or changes we make in our society or culture are bound to have consequences we have not anticipated.

If this lesson of history were really taken to heart, one would think we would stop trying to change things. But fortunately, we humans have

a marvelous capacity to adjust to whatever changes that do take place and to convince ourselves most of the time that what has happened was more or less what we willed all along. And, of course, all of us grow old and die and are replaced by those who never really know what the older generation's intentions were, and this makes the whole process of change easier to accept.

Still, Galston is right when he says that classical political philosophy and the neo-classical ideas of the founding fathers can offer principles and meanings by which we can continue to evaluate our liberal democracy and try to limit and control its abuses. Even ordinary citizens recognize that the founding fathers behaved very differently from our present politicians. During the bicentennial celebrations they often asked what would Washington, Jefferson, or Adams have thought about this or that aspect of our present politics. Such questions make historians wince, but they are obviously meaningful to ordinary people. To that extent at least the classical standards that were alive in eighteenth-century America still have some relevance for us today.