



Assumption
University

Digital Commons @ Assumption University

Political Science Department Faculty Works

Political Science Department

2015

Review of *Ambition in America: Political Power and the Collapse of Citizenship* by Jeffrey A. Becker

Greg Weiner

Assumption College, gs.weiner@assumption.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.assumption.edu/political-science-faculty>



Part of the [Political Science Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Weiner, G. (2015). Review of *Ambition in America: Political Power and the Collapse of Citizenship* by Jeffrey A. Becker. *American Political Thought* 4(4): 678-681. <https://doi.org/10.1086/683234>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Political Science Department at Digital Commons @ Assumption University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Political Science Department Faculty Works by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Assumption University. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@assumption.edu.

Jeffrey A. Becker. *Ambition in America: Political Power and the Collapse of Citizenship*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2014. Pp. xi+196. \$34.00.

This engaging and provocative volume examines a precarious phenomenon for republics: citizens' ambition to rule, which Jeffrey A. Becker argues poses inherent challenges to democratic equality yet is also "a necessary feature of democratic politics" (xi). Becker's interest is not merely the ambition of rulers but the ambition of citizens for society. This is an ambitious topic, and this book, while raising important questions, does not address them satisfactorily. Its freely alternating perspective between the ambitions of rulers and those of citizens creates conceptual confusions, while its substantive treatment of topics like *The Federalist* is frequently cursory and questionable, conducted at a step of remove through commentary on or quotations of secondary literature rather than direct engagement with the subject matter under consideration.

The essential problem that preoccupies Becker is how the regime can cultivate what he calls "healthy" forms of ambition, "where citizens seek public office because they revere the norms of democratic government" (8), a task complicated by Americans' ambivalence on the subject. Some ambition, he notes, is necessary, yet Americans have come to regard public ambition as antidemocratically elitist at the same time that they have "become disillusioned by democratic practices[, seeing] their civic principles as hollow or stagnant because of corruption," the result of which is inflated and unattainable expectations for politics: "Citizens' ambitions outstrip their politics' ability to

satisfy those ambitions” (10–11). The apparent thesis—somewhat obscured, again, by this alternation between citizens’ and leaders’ aspirations—is that citizens need healthy ambition in order to identify and cultivate leaders with healthy ambition.

Becker finds early American forms as expressed in both Puritanism and *The Federalist* wanting in this regard. He characterizes the Puritans as holding “shared ambitions for moral perfection” (20). Their “experience shows the danger posed to democracy when people assume they can infallibly divide one another into exclusive groups based on those who do and those who do not belong to a moral community” (21). All this is based on an unsatisfying treatment of John Winthrop’s “A Modell of Christian Charity”—an odd beginning point, since the Mayflower Compact would have supplied a more explicit and temporally prior model of self-government—in which Becker quotes only a few sentences of the original and far more of commentary on it. Given this cursory treatment, the precise contours of Becker’s objection to Winthrop are unclear. He characterizes the Puritan leader as believing that “governing authority was not morally neutral. To unite people in the redeeming undertaking of building a moral community means that people must give their loyalty and devotion to some principles rather than others” (23). But surely this is true of any coherent community. Becker seems to believe the Puritans simply went too far, obliterating natural shades of moral gray in favor of rigid and exclusionary distinctions. What is unclear, though, is why this is attributable at a theoretical level to the moral distinctions he identifies in Winthrop.

Becker characterizes *The Federalist* as suspicious of ambition and, indeed, neglectful of the cultivation of the ambition that a republic needs. Underlying this analysis is the Anti-Federalist refrain, synthesized by Wilson Carey McWilliams, that Publius’s regime is inattentive to the higher goods of politics. *The Federalist* Becker argues, “expresses a hostility toward political leadership that precludes the development of forums for educating citizens’ ambitions, a hostility American suspicion of power and authority sustains” (45). Similarly, *The Federalist* “institutionalizes a political climate inherently hostile to forms of leadership that might deviate from the ‘will of the people’” (55). But there are multiple problems with this analysis. One is that, in the passage from *Federalist* 10 to which Becker is elsewhere attentive but does not reconcile with his claim here, Publius does assign representatives a central role in “refin[ing] and enlarg[ing] the public views.” The papers on the Senate and the presidency (62, 63, 68, etc.) similarly talk about leadership. Second is that the national government was never intended to be a comprehensive *politeia*. It was rather established for specific purposes, with the bulk of political community remaining at the state and local levels. The system can perhaps be faulted for this, but within its self-understanding, it is not deficient for failing to provide all elements of politi-

cal health by the hand of the state. Not all of them are necessary for the explicit purposes of the national government, and not all of them are absent simply because the national government has not provided them. Finally, Becker seems to channel Anti-Federalists but provides no substantive foundation for his assertion, which Madison explicitly disclaims, that “*The Federalist* remakes the political community at the national level” such that “citizens no longer look to their state governments as the locus of ambition for political power; the new constitutional order assumes that position” (54).

Here again, the engagement with the text under consideration occurs largely at arm’s length via either generalized assertions or quotation of the commentaries of others, so it is difficult to assess Becker’s textual basis for such questionable claims as that “*The Federalist* structures the republic so the institutions of government control the dangers of faction” (42). In fact *Federalist* 10 supplies no such structure and discusses no such institutions. It merely observes that the empirical conditions of an extensive republic naturally inhibit majority factions. Elsewhere, Becker attributes to Madison the view “that Americans concern themselves only with success and not the lofty ambitions that would elevate humanity” (51). Perhaps Madison holds this view, but it would be easier to evaluate whether he does were the claim linked to a specific textual citation rather than merely asserted.

Becker’s chapter on the attractions but ultimate pitfalls of Jacksonian democracy is more successful but still suffers from the impulse toward questionable generalization, as in the following claim contrasting a competitive and therefore apparently antipolitical commercial economy with a communal agricultural one: “In a commercial society, some people profit *because* others lose or do not profit” (68). Similarly, such sweeping and hardly self-evident claims as the following synopsis of democracy beg for more analysis: “Even as the ambition to get ahead materially appeared further and further out of reach, citizens drew self-respect from working together to resolve common problems rather than appealing to charity. These are the core democratic ideals of self-government” (70).

This is one conception of democratic ideals—perhaps defensible even if undefended here—and it helps to explain Becker’s curious, intriguing but ultimately unconvincing appeal to Franklin Roosevelt as a Tocquevillian model of healthy democratic ambition. This chapter moves seamlessly and sometimes confusingly between the aristocratic ambition of Roosevelt and the populist ambition of his constituents. An instance of the latter is Becker’s claim that “for Tocqueville, local political associations could inspire, cultivate, and offer a forum for expressing those—formerly aristocratic—ambitions for greatness” (80). This is not quite Tocqueville’s argument about association, which he felt could combat individualism but which he did not explicitly associate with greatness.

The larger conceptual problem, which Becker acknowledges but does not adequately treat, is that Roosevelt the great centralizer can hardly be seen as the archetype of a Tocquevillian statesman. Becker nods toward this difficulty a handful of times, then grants it a three-page section that never really resolves the problem except to claim, rehabilitatively, that Roosevelt “sought to combine politics with administration; he did not—like many progressives—dismiss the give-and-take of political debate in favor of the ‘scientific management’ of the public’s business” (98). Yet Roosevelt had said even as a candidate, in his Commonwealth Club Address: “I want to speak not of politics but of government.”

The title of the chapter that includes Becker’s commentary on Roosevelt is “The Ambition to Recover Democratic Excellence.” But it is unclear whose excellence Becker means. The democratic ambition of which he seems to speak is that of participation and the taming of corporate power: all fair enough, but it is not evident that this is related to excellence, which requires not the challenge of others but the challenge of oneself. Becker’s concluding chapters, which take citizens to task for failing to do precisely that, succeed better. Our mistrust of ambition has, for example, caused us to adopt “a selection system [for candidates] that often filters out all but the most ambitious candidates, whose ambition is often loosely connected to established political practices and associations” (103). We select candidates who present themselves as above party and compromise, morally pure, and ideologically strident. “The success that accrues to individual political ambition in America teaches a dangerous lesson for democratic politics: that the individual can get ahead politically by using other citizens instrumentally to achieve personal ambitions” (131). Becker closes with important observations about the hunger for and costs of cult-of-personality politics. “Citizens who develop more of a personal identification with presidential candidates and their administrations see the president as relieving them of their own responsibility for self-government” (147). One only wishes the incisive reflections with which the book is capped had been placed atop a sturdier edifice.

Greg Weiner, *Assumption College*
