

POLITICS & GOVERNMENT

Mum's the Word

"The Strange Silence of Political Theory" by Jeffrey C. Isaac, in *Political Theory* (Nov. 1995), SAGE Publications, 2455 Teller Road, Thousand Oaks, Calif. 91320.

You might think that certain events of the recent past—the revolutions of 1989 in Eastern Europe, the end of the Cold War, the collapse of the Soviet Union, the triumph of Western liberalism—would catch the attention of professional political theorists. Apparently not. Their response, complains Isaac, a political scientist at Indiana University, has been "a deafening silence."

Between 1989 and '93, *Political Theory*, "the premier journal of American political theory," published 108 full-length articles. Only one had anything to do with the events of 1989. *Polity*, "the most important American political science journal regularly publishing political theory," ran 61 articles in the field, with only one lonely review-essay about 1989. The *American Political Science Review*, *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, and *Ethics* did not muster a single article among them. In all, Isaac says, political theorists wrote 384 articles during the four years, and only two dealt with these

world-transforming events.

What accounts for this "shocking" failure? he asks. "How can a form of inquiry that claims to be the heir of Plato, Machiavelli, Tocqueville, and Marx, thinkers profoundly caught up in the events of their day, be so oblivious to what is going on around it?"

Too many political theorists, Isaac believes, are lost in an insular world, using esoteric jargon, speaking only to one another, and preoccupied with the writings of other, earlier or fashionable, thinkers. Instead of dealing directly with a subject such as constitutionalism, they prefer to think and write about "Locke on Constitutional Government" or "Constitutionalism in Habermas." Unlike the eminent political thinkers of the past, Isaac laments, today's theorists seem content to be mere "puzzle solvers of the problems of others, focusing on approved topics, following academic conventions."

The Other Lincoln

"Lincoln's First Love" by Mark E. Neely, Jr., in *Civil War Times* (Nov.–Dec. 1995), P.O. Box 8200, Harrisburg, Pa. 17105-8200.

If there is one president whose political career marks him as ever calculating, overly ambitious, suspicious, and willing at times to resort to "dirty tricks," it is, of course, Richard M. Nixon. And seeming to stand in saintly contrast is the first Republican president, Abraham Lincoln. Historians don't like to admit it, contends Neely, a Pulitzer Prize-winning historian at St. Louis University, but there was more than a little Nixon in Honest Abe.

Politics was Lincoln's "first love," Neely asserts. His ambition, as his law partner once said, was "a little engine that knew no rest." He served one term (1847–49) in the U.S. House of Representatives, ran

unsuccessfully for the U.S. Senate in 1855, and tried again three years later.

His famous debates with Democratic senator Stephen A. Douglas, the last of them on October 15, 1858, are often cited among the great moments in American political history. But they were only part of his hard-fought campaign as the Republican candidate for the Senate. He spent most of the next two weeks giving speeches, greeting voters, and writing letters. In those days when state legislatures, not the voting populace, chose U.S. senators, Lincoln was trying to help enough



Lincoln, pictured in 1857, "lived the life of a professional politician."

How to Fix Government

Sargent Shriver, the first director (1961–66) of the Peace Corps, ought to be a role model for government's reinventors, contends Charles Peters, editor of the *Washington Monthly* (Dec. 1995).

Although he later went on to perform many other assignments with distinction, it was at the Peace Corps that he made the administrative innovations that should earn him canonization as the man who showed us how to make government work. In the present time, when many despair whether government can do anything right, what he did to make the Peace Corps a success could not be more relevant.

What he understood was, first, the importance of selecting the right people to staff the organization and of getting rid of those who didn't work out, and second, the importance of knowing better than anyone else what was happening where the rubber met the road for his agency, which in the case of the Peace Corps was what the volunteers were doing in the field. . . .

And just as Shriver did not hesitate to fire staff members who didn't work out, as many as a third of a volunteer group would be dropped from a training program if it appeared they could not do the job overseas.

Other government administrators do not have the power over personnel that Shriver exercised. Shouldn't we give it to them if we are truly serious about making government work?

Republican legislative candidates win to ensure his own election. When, on arriving in the west-central part of the state, he noticed clusters of itinerant Irish laborers around the railroad station, he became worried, Neely says. "Irish-Americans always worried Republicans, for these Catholic newcomers to the country were notorious for their allegiance to the Democratic party and for their footloose ways." Since there was no voter registration then and election laws were lax, voting fraud was easily accomplished.

In a letter to a Republican operative, Lincoln offered "a bare suggestion": "When there is a known body of these voters, could not a true man, of the 'detective' class, be introduced among them in disguise, who

could, at the nick of time, control their votes? Think it over. It would be a great thing, when this trick is attempted upon us, to have the saddle come up on the other horse. I have talked, more fully than I can write, to Mr. [John Locke] Scripps, and he will talk to you. If we can head off the fraudulent votes we shall carry the day."

Neely does not say (perhaps it is unknown) whether Lincoln's plan was carried out, but, in any case, he failed to unseat Douglas. Curiously, Neely observes, the indiscrete letter is seldom included in Lincoln anthologies. The sooner historians stop trying to keep this supreme politician free from the "taint" of politics, he concludes, "the closer we will come to understanding him."

Adventures of a Bureaucrat

"Adventures in Wonderland: A Scholar in Washington" by Diane Ravitch, in *The American Scholar* (Autumn 1995), Phi Beta Kappa Society, 1811 Q St. N.W., Washington, D.C. 20009.

In July 1991, during the Bush administration, Ravitch, the noted education historian and author, was sworn into office as an assistant secretary of the U.S. Department of Education. She was put in charge of the Office of Educational Research and

Improvement (OERI) and given a grand office with a full view of the Capitol. During the next 18 months, she writes, she found herself "constantly amazed or angered by the ways things worked."

OERI, her \$450 million domain, had