

Joe Biden and Donald Trump in debate.  
MORRY GASH/POOL/AFP via Getty Images

# 1

## GAMES POLITICIANS PLAY

At its best, politics can be a civilizing activity. It can preserve the peace, protect human rights, advance economic well-being, and encourage excellence in the arts and sciences. At its worst, however, politics—particularly for those on the losing side of the struggle for power—makes for war, tyranny, economic ruin, and barbarism. Even in democratic and constitutional countries, politics at its worst involves falsehood, deception, and meanness. In this chapter, we explore politics at its best and at its worst by examining some classic models in history, literature, and political philosophy. These examples suggest certain patterns that we call “political games.”

### THE GAME OF POLITICS

**Politics** is a process, within or among political communities, whereby (1) public values are articulated, debated, and prescribed; (2) diverse political actors (individuals, interest groups, local or regional governments, and nations) cooperate and struggle for power to satisfy their vital needs, protect their fundamental interests, and advance their perceived desires; and (3) policy judgments are made and implemented. Although subject to certain constraints imposed by the larger environment, political actors are still remarkably free to shape their own destinies—for good or ill. They have a creative ability to respond to political problems in diverse ways. The political games we will analyze illustrate a variety of such responses. Your critical appraisal of these games should advance three of this book’s central purposes:

1. To deepen your critical appreciation of the good political life

## Chapter Learning Objectives

After studying this chapter, you will be able to do the following:

1. Describe ways in which the study of politics involves both moral judgment about goals and a scientific understanding of the way politics works.
2. Discuss the political game of wipeout.
3. Explain the political game of lion and fox.
4. Describe the political game of civil disobedience.

2. To enhance your scientific understanding of politics
3. To develop your capacity for wise political judgment

We chose the games that follow because they illustrate a wide range of political activity—physical annihilation, the struggle for power, and nonviolent civil disobedience. These patterns illustrate various forms of **power**: military power, political cunning, and the appeal to conscience. Although we do not include a specific game to illustrate the wheeling and dealing of such constitutional games as “bargaining”—commonly referred to as the politics of accommodation—this pattern is treated frequently throughout the book.

## Elements of the Game

In this introductory chapter, our guiding question is this: How can the metaphor of a game serve our understanding of politics? The political games that we present are dramatic and educational. As drama, they may entertain. As education, they may enhance critical intelligence and shape political character and wise judgment. But can such a serious business as politics be called a game? We certainly do not mean to imply a frivolous pastime. We do, however, mean to suggest that all politics as contests have certain basic elements commonly found in other kinds of games. A game includes **players**—contestants who win or lose, who compete or cooperate in pursuit of certain goals, who exercise power or will, who enjoy or suffer. The **stakes** in the game are the goals that can be gained in victory or lost in defeat. The **rules** are the agreed-on procedures that must be followed if the game is to retain its identity; they regulate the conduct of the game. Finally, games entail **strategies and tactics**—plans of action, schemes of attack or defense, and judgments that bring about victory or defeat.

Thus, one way to look at politics is to see it as a gamelike struggle to fulfill certain purposes; to gain, keep, and use power; and to formulate public policy. By viewing politics in this way, we can better explore its key patterns. Unfortunately, the games politicians play are more complicated than football or chess. Unlike the contestants in such games, politicians involved in a given battle may not follow the same rules or even any discernible set of directions. They may even change the rules midgame, and new players frequently enter the game at unpredictable times. If all the players do not follow the same rules, the players who have to respond to their opponents are at a serious disadvantage. This creates the kind of confusion and alarm that we call the Alice-in-Wonderland effect. When Alice plays croquet in Wonderland, she is not accustomed to using hedgehogs for croquet balls, flamingos for mallets, and soldiers for arches. Nor is she accustomed to a system in which the accused is first beheaded and then tried!

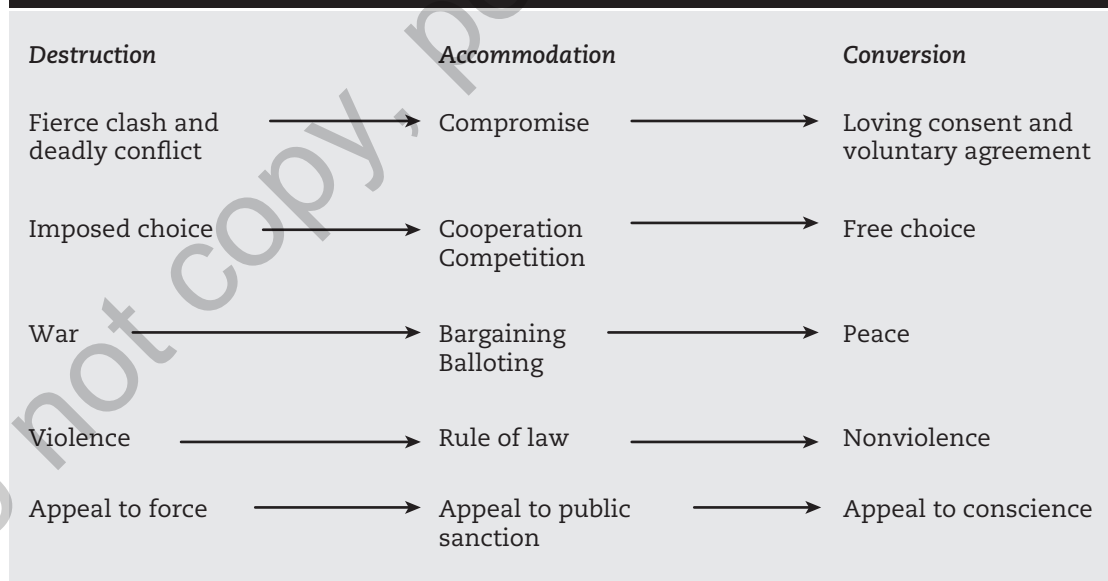
To compound the confusion created when there is no agreement on rules, politicians frequently shift from one game to another without warning. Consequently, a participant may not be aware of the decisive game—and its rules—until the contest is over. Politicians may also attempt to play several games simultaneously.

## The Destruction-Accommodation-Conversion Continuum

Can we devise a scheme to help us understand the variety of political games? Several classifications are possible. Figure 1.1 offers a scheme in which the games are seen as ranging across a destruction-accommodation-conversion continuum. At one end of the continuum are games aimed at complete **destruction** of the opposing player. These games are marked by deadly conflict and war. Violence, including **terrorism** and torture, is prominent, and political, economic, psychological, and military instruments of force are used to exercise power.

Joseph Stalin's destruction of those he perceived as enemies within the Soviet Union is one infamous example of a game of destruction. Stalin came to power in the Soviet Union shortly after V. I. Lenin's death in 1924 and ruled with dictatorial power until his own death in 1953. Through his actions and policies, Stalin executed high-ranking political and military leaders and millions of other people suspected of disloyalty. Many people were killed outright; others died of starvation (most famously in a state-induced famine in the Ukraine during the mid-1930s); and still others died in prison camps, what the Russian novelist Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn called the Gulag Archipelago, a chain of prison labor camps spread across the Soviet Union.<sup>1</sup> No one was allowed to stand in the way of his quest for absolute power.

**Figure 1.1 The Destruction-Accommodation-Conversion Continuum**



Source: Compiled by authors.

Adolf Hitler also illustrates a twentieth-century pattern of destruction. He, too, killed high-ranking party members who had helped him come to power. He, too, destroyed all effective political opposition to his rule. His barbaric campaign of destruction led to murderous onslaughts against Germany's neighbors, to slave labor for millions forced to work for the Nazi war machine, to concentration camps and death for millions of Germans and other Europeans, and to the Holocaust (the systematic killing of 6 million Jews).

More recent examples of the destruction game can be found all around the world: in the genocidal slaughter in Cambodia (Kampuchea) in Southeast Asia in the 1970s; in the Rwanda genocide of the mid-1990s as well as the **ethnic cleansing** in Bosnia and Herzegovina during the same decade; in the massacres occurring in the Darfur region of Sudan in Africa in the 2000s; in the terrorism visited on New York City and Washington, DC, with the total destruction of the World Trade Center towers and partial destruction of the Pentagon in 2001; in the savage repression by the Syrian government against its own people in 2011 and 2012 that eventually morphed into a terrible civil war; and in the brutal rule of Kim Jong-un in North Korea. Such destruction was a dreadful twentieth-century reality of politics at its worst, and now, it seems, it is a reality of the twenty-first century as well. Will this type of destruction continue in this century?

In the middle of the continuum are games of **accommodation**, marked by cooperation, bargaining, and balloting. This pattern of politics is characterized by free elections, a two-party or multiparty system, public debate, and constitutional action according to the rule of law. Games of accommodation predominate in liberal democracies and in democratic socialist regimes. However, variations on these games also occur in authoritarian regimes.

At the other end of the continuum are games characterized by the peaceful **conversion** of the opponent. This pattern of politics stresses voluntary agreement and emphasizes free choice. In this pattern, even a majority decision may be ignored if the majority deviates from the claims of conscience. Love, conscience, and reason are the instruments employed in games of conversion. If games of destruction rely on arbitrary dictatorial edicts and games of accommodation rely on constitutional majority rule, then games of conversion look to unanimous agreement. Players of the game of conversion—for example, religious groups such as the Society of Friends (Quakers)—may seek to exercise influence (a version of power), but such influence is based, they argue, on truth and love rather than on majority rule or physical force.

Thus, the use of power to get political actors to do what they would not normally do ranges from overwhelming violence at the extreme pole of destruction to overwhelming charismatic, or spiritual, power—the free appeal, by word and deed, to the mind and heart—at the other pole of conversion. Political games, then, may involve fierce clashes and deadly conflicts, mild competition and pacific accommodation, or loving consent and freely given obedience.

Along the continuum, power may be used in many ways other than for destruction or conversion. Power may be used to balance, to seduce, or to support. For example, political actors may use the carrot or the stick to exercise influence: They may promise and deliver a host of benefits (money, goods and services, position, prestige) or they may threaten and retaliate with sanctions (the loss of benefits).

Political behavior is thus often a mixture of bullets and ballots, of arbitrary might and the rule of law, of bullying and encouraging. The character of the game depends significantly on the sanity of the players, the vital interests at stake, the status of rules and law, and judgments about wise policy and strategy.

Now, we will turn to some dramatic games drawn from history, literature, and political theory. These examples illustrate the way the game of politics is played in all its variety.

## **WIPEOUT: THE POLITICS OF DESTRUCTION**

Superficially, **wipeout** is a simple game. One player, insisting on total domination, encounters resistance and employs brute physical force to destroy an opponent. Wipeout exemplifies the ultimate use of force in the struggle for power. Of course, complications can occur because of the different ways in which power is used, the maneuvers that precede total destruction, or the strange “logic” of a “reason of state” that “justifies” exterminating the opponent. The following classic model of wipeout will help explain some possible complications.

### **Athens and Melos**

In his *History of the Peloponnesian War*, the Greek historian Thucydides presents the game with brilliant clarity.<sup>2</sup> The game unfolds at Melos, a Greek island caught in the midst of the savage war between two much more powerful and mortal political enemies: Athens and Sparta. Because the Melians will “not submit to the Athenians like the other islanders,” they are forced into a confrontation. In the great struggle between Athens and Sparta for the mastery of greater Greece, the Melians at first remain neutral. But when the Athenians plunder Melian territory, the Melians assume “an attitude of open hostility.” This leads to the brutal confrontation between the Athenians and the Melians (see [Map 1.1](#)).

Initially, the Athenians seek to negotiate the capitulation of Melos without all-out war. They have overwhelming military power and want to press their advantage. Their message is loud and clear: Surrender or be wiped out! They attempt to win the Melians over by appealing to their self-interest. The safety and security—indeed, the very preservation—of Melos requires that the Melians submit to Athens. The Melians must accept the harsh realities of power politics. The Athenians candidly declare, “You know as well as we do that right, as the world goes, is only in question between equals in power. . . . The strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must.” Do not, they urge the Melians, rely on appeals to **justice**, the gods, or the Spartans. Such appeals will not be answered.

At a serious disadvantage in the contest, the Melians try desperately to shift the game’s emphasis from power to justice. They plead for the “privilege of being allowed in danger to invoke what is fair and right.” They appeal to the gods. They remind Athens of the power of Sparta. They warn Athens of potential dangers. They cling to the idea of heroic resistance: “To submit is to give ourselves over to despair, while action still

## Map 1.1 Ancient Greece



Source: CQ Press.

preserves for us a hope that we may stand erect. ... We will not in a moment deprive of freedom a city that has been inhabited these 700 years ... and so we will try to save ourselves. Meanwhile we invite you to allow us to be friends to you and foes to neither party.”

The Athenians reject the idea of a neutral Melos and reemphasize their earlier arguments. The neutrality of Melos would adversely affect Athenian power, and appeals to justice, the gods, and the Spartans will not be answered because gods and men respect power. “Of the gods we believe, and of men we know, that by a necessary law of their nature they rule wherever they can.” The Spartans will aid the Melians only when Spartan self-interest is engaged and Spartan power can be mustered without grave risk. Unfortunately for Melos, Sparta’s vital interests are not at stake, and its power is not great enough to warrant a challenge to Athens at Melos. So, the Athenians plead with the Melians: Do not be blind. Be prudent. Save yourselves. Do not be led by fear of disgrace into hopeless disaster. Do not hesitate to protect your country and its prosperity. Choose security, not war and ruin.

So, the game is played. The Athenians seek domination without war but reserve the power to destroy their opponent. The Melians insist on freedom and independence even at the risk of war, and they hope for the best. Thus, the debate over power and justice, over “reason of state,” and over enlightened self-interest comes to an end. The war of words, which so candidly reveals the strategy and tactics of the players, ceases. Physical hostilities commence. The Athenians lay siege to the isle of Melos. Pushed beyond endurance, the Melians finally surrender. Thucydides writes that the Athenians “put to death all the grown men whom they took, and sold the children for slaves, and subsequently sent out five hundred colonists and inhabited the place themselves.”

This sketch identifies the players, stakes, rules, and strategy of the game of wipeout. The opponents played for varied stakes. Athens sought to dominate Melos. For Melos, there were three possible outcomes: (1) life and freedom, at best; (2) submission and domination if Melos agreed to accept Athens’s terms; or (3) war, destruction, slavery, and death, at worst.

In examining this game, we discover that there were no agreed-on rules to protect the Melians. They sought in vain to persuade the Athenians to honor a code of justice and to respect the rules of neutrality. The Melians also failed to convince the Athenians to observe the rule that warns of the penalties for aggression. Such penalties may have to be paid when the aggressor’s action engenders countervailing power or when the aggressor loses power.

The Athenians urged the Melians to accept the game of mastery. They urged the Melians to consider the penalties for failing to play the Athenian game: war, destruction, and death. They urged recognition of the rule that “justice” is the interest of the stronger party. Superior power, not abstract justice or sentimental goodwill, is what counts in politics. Athenian strategy was thus guided by Athens’s need to protect its vital interests with superior strength. Such strength could normally convince an opponent, who sees self-preservation as the most vital interest, to back down. Melian strategy included an appeal to the gods, to justice, to the Spartans, and to Athenian self-interest.

## Relevance to Modern Politics

The pattern of purpose, power, and policy revealed by this game can be illustrated in a host of actions throughout history. We have already highlighted the destructive patterns of Stalin and Hitler. To their actions, we can add thousands of other “wipeouts,” such as the conquests of native North and South Americans by Spaniards, Portuguese, Anglo-Americans, and French. Communist regimes in North Korea, China, and Cuba have also wiped out their political opponents, sometimes through murder, sometimes through imprisonment or exile. Fascist dictators such as Benito Mussolini in Italy and Francisco Franco in Spain did likewise. In recent history, we had the brutality of Saddam Hussein in Iraq, Bashar al-Assad in Syria, and Kim Jong-un in North Korea.

**Genocide** and ethnic cleansing are other forms of wipeout. Genocide is the systematic mass destruction of a national, ethnic, racial, or religious group, and ethnic cleansing is the forceful displacement of a group from a given territory based on its religion, ethnicity, race, or nationality and may involve mass murder as well. In Cambodia (Kampuchea), from 1975 to 1978, the Khmer Rouge, led by Pol Pot,



compiled one of the worst records of human rights violations in history as a result of a thorough and brutal attempt to restructure Cambodian society. More than 1 million people, out of a total population of approximately 7 million, were killed or died under the Khmer Rouge's genocidal regime.<sup>3</sup> To this horror, we can add the genocide in Rwanda in 1994, in which members of the Hutu tribe killed nearly 1 million of their fellow Rwandans who were members of the Tutsi tribe. Ethnic cleansing in Bosnia and Serbia, also in the mid-1990s, and in the Darfur region of Sudan in the first decade of this century, illustrate a contemporary pattern of wipeout. Most recently we note the attacks by the Myanmar military against the Muslim minority, Rohingya, that have raged since 1917.

Terrorism is another pattern of political wipeout. Defining the term is a very difficult and controversial task. How we define *terrorism* and count terrorist actions will significantly affect how we approach the problem. Nonetheless, there is at least some agreement that terrorism is the use of violence against innocent civilians in order to achieve a political goal. But two issues make it difficult to get beyond this simple definition. The first issue is motive. We can update the old adage and say, "One man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter." One view holds that terrorism is nothing more than a vicious criminal act and there is no excuse for the killing of innocent people. Others take the stand that terrorism can, at least to some degree, be a legitimate instrument to counter powerful government repression and other unjust policies. Some view terrorism as an act of liberation. The other controversy has to do with identifying the terrorists. Some people believe that the definition of terrorism should include acts of terror perpetrated by governments, not merely nongovernmental groups. With an understanding that these issues are not fully resolved, terrorism will be defined as the use of violence by nongovernmental groups against innocent civilians for the purpose of achieving political goals.

While in recent years much of our attention has been riveted on the September 11, 2001, attacks on the World Trade Center in New York City and the Pentagon in Washington, DC, terrorism can be traced back 2,000 years to groups like the Sicari and the Zealots, Jewish groups that fought against the first-century Roman occupation of the Middle East. Another early religious terrorist group, the Assassins, operating in the eleventh century, originated in the Ismaili sect of Shia Islam. The Balkans, Russia, and Ireland were fertile grounds for terrorist organizations during the latter part of the nineteenth century. The United States was not immune from terrorism during this period, as evidenced by the violent activities of the Ku Klux Klan to fight Reconstruction after the Civil War. In the post-World War II period, terrorist methods were used by some, but not all, decolonization movements in Africa, the Middle East, and Asia.<sup>4</sup>

The modern era of international terrorism emerged primarily out of Europe and the Middle East, with a variety of groups crossing national borders to carry out high-profile terrorist acts in order to maximize visibility for their cause. During the latter part of the 1960s and through the 1970s, groups such as the Palestine Liberation Organization, the Italian Red Brigades, and the West German Red Army Faction carried out a large number of spectacular terrorist acts that involved airline skyjacking and kidnapping of high-profile hostages. Probably the most famous terrorist act prior to September 11 was the attack at the 1972 Olympic Games in Germany when the Palestinian group Black September seized and murdered eleven Israeli athletes.

Despite the attention given to terrorism, the frequency of such incidents fluctuates over time. For instance, international terrorism reached near epidemic levels in the mid-1980s only to begin falling in the early to mid-1990s. Through 2019, deaths from terrorism had fallen for five straight years. One of the challenges for the student of politics is interpreting statistics and trends in order to form a clear understanding of what is actually happening in the world. For example, in 2006 the US State Department broadened its definition of terrorist acts; this caused a dramatic increase in the number of terrorist incidents that the State Department reported. Although this does not necessarily mean terrorism is any more or less of a problem, these data can affect how policymakers and citizens perceive the issue. Nonetheless, no matter how we define the dangers of terrorism, the events of September 11 clearly demonstrate that a few incidents can kill thousands. And some analysts worry that the sophistication of such attacks has grown in recent years, as demonstrated by the meticulously coordinated attacks in Bali, Indonesia, and Moscow, Russia, in 2002; Madrid, Spain, and Beslan, North Ossetia, Russia, in 2004; London, England, in 2005; Mumbai, India, in 2008; Peshawar, Pakistan, in 2014; and Paris, France, and in the Sinai Desert, Egypt, in 2015. In 2020 a sophisticated drone missile attack killed 116 at a Yemenis mosque during prayers and during the same year, 101 people were killed in two attacks on villages in Nigeria and Niger. At the same time, less technologically advanced methods of terrorism can harm fewer people while still fostering a climate of fear that severely weakens the health and stability of any society. We see this in the rogue terrorist attacks in recent years carried out by individuals often radicalized via the Internet and possessing no affiliation to established terrorist groups.

To understand such political games is not to approve of them, any more than a doctor approves of disease. But in politics, as in medicine, diagnosis must precede prognosis. Only with a fuller, more critical understanding of purpose, power, and policy can we begin to explore what leads some political actors to engage in wipeout. We can then ask a crucial ethical question: What power should be exercised to protect a state's vital interests or a ruler's ideological commitments or positions? We can also ask an important empirical question: Is superior power (understood here as physical force) what counts in politics? And we can ask a troubling, prudential question: Is it ever wise to sacrifice freedom to ensure self-preservation?

The relevance of these matters to modern politics is suggested by the following Key Questions, which illustrate the problematic character of politics. These questions suggest the difficulties inherent in the struggle for power. Next, we will examine another political game to illustrate the complexity of that struggle.

## **LION AND FOX: THE POLITICS OF THE NATION-STATE**

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We find the title of our second game in the work of Niccolò Machiavelli, a controversial student of Renaissance Italy.<sup>5</sup> The key players are the rulers of states. At stake are each state's vital interests: its unity, independence, freedom, security, power, and prosperity. The key rules in this game require leaders to behave realistically, to protect their

community's vital interests, and to use both force and craft. Violation of the rules will incur severe penalties.

## Machiavelli: The End Justifies the Means

If princes, or rulers, are to win amid the struggles for power that surround them, they must be adept at the “beastly” game of realistic politics. They cannot survive and prosper if they know or play only the higher human game of morality and law. They must know the game of **lion and fox**, played primarily with force and craft and, if necessary, unscrupulously. As Machiavelli puts it, “A prince being thus obliged to know well how to act as a beast must imitate the fox and the lion, for the lion cannot protect himself from traps, and the fox cannot defend himself from wolves. One must therefore be a fox to recognize traps, and a lion to frighten wolves.”

Machiavelli holds that a prince is justified in playing the game of lion and fox because “in the actions of men, and especially of princes ... the end justifies the means.” “For,” he writes, “where the very safety of the country depends upon the resolution to be taken, no considerations of justice or injustice, humanity or cruelty, nor of glory or of shame, should be allowed to prevail. But putting all other considerations aside, the only question should be, What course will save the life and liberty of the country?” When the occasion demands it, force and craft must be used boldly and shrewdly. On such occasions “good faith” and “integrity” can be sacrificed. The prince (as a lion or a fox) has only “to be a great feigner and dissembler.” Machiavelli continues, “Thus it is well to seem merciful, faithful, humane, sincere, religious, and also to be so; but you must have the mind so disposed that when it is needful to be otherwise you may be able to change to the opposite qualities.” Hence, “in order to maintain the state,” a prince may be obliged “to act against faith, against charity, against humanity, and against religion.”

Machiavelli outlines the general strategy of lion and fox with great candor. The prince must act “to secure himself against enemies, to gain friends, to conquer by force or fraud, to make himself beloved and feared by the people, [and] followed and revered by ... [his] soldiers.” With a keen regard for circumstances, he must act with Renaissance *virtù*—that is, to act with resolve and energy and achieve great things. Appreciative of dangers, the prince must be prepared to “destroy those who can injure him.” With an eye to power, he must “maintain the friendship of kings and princes in such a way that they are glad to benefit him and fear to injure him.” Recognizing the importance of the citizenry, the prince will win and keep widespread popular support and rely on a loyal citizen army. Above all, he will use muscle power and brainpower, severity and kindness, with discrimination and a shrewd regard for his ends and his power.

Machiavelli does not exclude the rule of law or the influence of traditional Christian morality. But he does assert that, in playing the game of lion and fox in a political world, the prince who confuses what ought to be with what is will surely lose. “For how we live is so far removed from how we ought to live, that he who abandons what is done for what ought to be done, will rather learn to bring about his own ruin than his preservation.”

The foregoing strategy is prominent in *The Prince*, which Machiavelli wrote as a textbook for statesmen who would establish a state in a world beset by corruption,

quarrelsome groups, foreign interference, and external aggression. But even in *The Discourses*, his book on the internal and external affairs of Rome, Machiavelli insists that those who would rule a republic on the basis of good laws must also be concerned with good arms. Moreover, even in a republic, a high commitment to popular virtue, a balance of social classes, the constitutional competition of parties, and the sound exercise of public opinion must not make the republican ruler forget the beastly game of lion and fox.

Physical power, particularly military strength, is crucial in nation-state politics and must be used, when necessary, effectively. For Machiavelli, military power means a citizen army. Good soldiers are the “sinews of war.” The prince must be skilled in the organization, discipline, and conduct of war. He must use power to eliminate actual enemies and to paralyze potential enemies. The prince must be wary of helping others to become powerful. He must avoid making common cause with someone more powerful than himself. He should always use shrewd judgment in exercising power—guarding against false hope, overexpansion, the “insolence of victory,” empty threats, and “insulting words.”

The prince must be a “ferocious lion” and an “astute fox.” He must shrewdly consider the uses of power and the uses of love, fear, hate, cruelty, and magnanimity. Thus, to build a strong internal base for his power, a prudent prince should seek to maintain popular favor, satisfy popular needs, and reward merit and achievement. The prince must artfully seek “to be feared and loved.” But since “it is difficult for the two to go together,” if he has to choose, he will act on the assumption that “it is much safer to be feared than loved.” Moreover, the “prince should make himself feared in such a way that if he does not gain love, he ... avoids hatred.” To this end, a prince should abstain “from interfering with the property of his citizens and subjects or with their women.” If he has to take a life, let the reason be clear and the justification convincing.

If possible, villainy and hatred should be avoided, but sometimes circumstances require cruelty. Then, Machiavelli suggests, “The conqueror must arrange to commit all his cruelties at once, so as not to have to recur to them every day, and so as to be able, by not making fresh changes, to reassure people and win them over by benefitting them.” Here Machiavelli makes his famous—or infamous—distinction between “well-committed” and “ill-committed” cruelties: “Well committed may be called those (if it be permissible to use the word well of evil) which are perpetuated for the need of securing one’s self, and which afterwards are not persisted in, but are exchanged for measures as useful to the subjects as possible. Cruelties ill committed are those which, although at first few, increase rather than diminish with time.” And, of course, the prince should let



Courtesy of the Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division

Machiavelli is known as both a political thinker and practicing politician. In this painting Machiavelli is shown seated near Cesare Borgia—a true prince who was willing to use both force, like the lion, and cunning, like the fox, to achieve his goals. Machiavelli’s most famous book, *The Prince*, highlighted the abilities of men like Borgia to do whatever is necessary to achieve and maintain power. Painting by Faraffini, circa 1898.

others handle his cruelties and unpopular duties while he bestows “favors.” Appearances matter in Machiavelli’s account of politics.

## Relevance to Modern Politics

Lion and fox is a difficult and dangerous game that is probably played more frequently throughout the world than most rulers (of liberal democracies as well as authoritarian regimes) are willing to admit. The high goals of classical political philosophy and modern constitutional morality are abandoned in this game. Machiavelli is willing to accept less than the best political life because justice is not possible for earthly political actors. In the battle between actual power and traditional morality, morality loses.

This game is notorious because of the candor with which Machiavelli laid bare its rules and its strategy. This notoriety should not obscure either the strengths or the weaknesses of the game. Machiavelli sought to achieve unity for Italy in the face of widespread popular corruption, dreadful internal divisions, and despised foreign domination. He held that the philosophy and tactics he advocated would achieve victory. He hoped, of course, that the outcome of the game would be a virtuous republic in which a divisive church, quarreling nobles, numerous principalities, and interfering foreign powers would not prevent the people from enjoying unity, liberty, prosperity, and strength.

But is it possible to find a great man—a Machiavellian prince—able to do the job? The problem haunted Machiavelli in Renaissance Italy:

And as the reformation of the political condition of a state presupposes a good man, whilst the making of himself prince of a republic by violence naturally presupposes a bad one, it will consequently be exceedingly rare that a good man should be found willing to employ wicked means to become prince, even though his final object be good; or that a bad man, after having become prince, should be willing to labor for good ends, and that it should enter his mind to use for good purposes that authority which he has acquired by evil means.

The problem still haunts us today as we reflect on the careers of Napoleon, Otto von Bismarck, Stalin, Hitler, and hundreds of other national leaders, oppressive tyrants, and false messiahs.

It is a tribute to Machiavelli’s genius that he understood so well what rulers of modern nation-states think they must do. They must protect the state’s vital interests. They must be devoted, pragmatically, to success. They must maintain a love affair with power, particularly military power. They must not confuse what ought to be with what is. They must be prepared to operate as both lions and foxes.

Sometimes we may think that lion and fox describes only authoritarian rulers or such forceful and astute leaders as Bismarck, the “Iron Chancellor” of nineteenth-century Germany, whose use of military might and diplomatic cunning played a dominant role in unifying his country. Yet rulers of constitutional democracies also play lion and fox in both domestic and foreign affairs. For example, following the 2001 attack on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, the George W. Bush administration may have pushed the legal envelope in extending the power to wiretap American citizens in order to gain better intelligence on potential acts of terrorism.

The game is also evident in US domestic politics. For example, dirty tricks in political campaigns illustrate “foxy” politics in operation. The Watergate scandal is the best known because it reached into the office of the US presidency itself. Watergate is the name given to a series of scandals in President Richard M. Nixon’s administration. First, there was an attempted burglary of the Democratic Party’s national headquarters at the Watergate office complex in Washington, DC, in June 1972. Two employees of President Nixon’s reelection committee were involved, and Nixon’s former attorney general was accused of approving the break-in. Then, the president’s top advisers, and allegedly Nixon himself, attempted to cover up the bungled burglary. A number of officials were convicted for their roles in the affair. On August 9, 1974, Richard Nixon resigned his presidency under threat of impeachment.



Although the game of the lion and the fox has many champions, it is a dangerous game to play. President Richard M. Nixon was forced from office in 1974 after the Watergate scandal tainted his administration and his part in the cover-up was discovered.

It is fair to say that Donald Trump’s presidency was laced with decisions that reflected the lion and fox game. This was particularly true with regard to his insistence on personal loyalty. So long as members of his administration from cabinet officials on down were publicly supportive of him and his policies, they kept their jobs. If, however, they publicly dissented in any way from his policies, they were often summarily fired and replaced by people who he believed would be more loyal. From his inauguration in 2016 until January 14, 2021, the turnover in his executive office, excluding Cabinet secretaries, was 92 percent, with most turnover due to outright firing or resignation under pressure. This rate of turnover was higher than Presidents Barack Obama, George W. Bush, Bill Clinton, George H.W. Bush, and Ronald Reagan.<sup>6</sup> Although, it is an open question to how well Trump “played” Machiavelli’s game, his demand for loyalty certainly had elements of the kind of amoral cunning that we associate with the lion and fox game. However, his White House was rife with factions and infighting, leaks to the press, and he ultimately lost reelection. One wonders whether Machiavelli would be impressed with Trump’s ability to execute the plans necessary to be a true Prince.

Leaders in other administrations have also been seen in a Machiavellian light. For example, James MacGregor Burns titled his sympathetic study of Franklin D. Roosevelt, *Roosevelt: The Lion and the Fox*. Thus, many students of politics recognize that widely admired leaders with noble ends might very well be characterized as playing the game of the lion and the fox.

Students of political science must ask critical questions about this game. See the Key Questions on the next page.

We now turn to a quite distinctive political game more concerned with peace and the appeal to conscience to achieve its ends.

## CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE: THE POLITICS OF MORALITY

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The game of **civil disobedience**, which was dramatized by the Greek tragedian Sophocles in *Antigone*, is well known to the modern world. Henry David Thoreau explored the game in a perceptive essay in the nineteenth century. Mohandas Gandhi made it popular in India—and the world—in the twentieth century. Norwegians and Danes used it tellingly against the Nazis in World War II. And Martin Luther King Jr. revealed its capabilities in the United States during his tragically brief but influential life. We have subtitled this game “the politics of morality” because the appeal to conscience, and thus to a higher law, is its central characteristic. In our examination, we will use Thoreau’s brilliant essay “On Civil Disobedience” as our model.<sup>7</sup>

### Thoreau: “On Civil Disobedience”

Who are the players in Thoreau’s game? His answer resounds across the years. On one side are people of conscience—people of superior morality and integrity, who are human beings first and subjects second. On the other side are those who lack moral vision or courage—governments, majorities, people blind to the higher law or lacking the courage of their convictions. Specifically for Thoreau, on one side are those who oppose slavery and war; on the other side are the federal and state governments and the spineless multitudes that follow them.

What are the stakes? Nothing less than the abolition of outrageous moral evil and the return to the commandments of the higher law. In Thoreau’s case, the evils are slavery and war, and the commandments are freedom and peace. Thoreau insists, “This people must cease to hold slaves” and cease to “make war on Mexico, though it cost them their existence as a people.”

The following rules apply to the people of conscience who play this game. First, the game must be peaceful. To employ violence is to break a cardinal rule. Second, the act of disobedience must be selectively aimed at an outrageous moral evil. The protest must not be an indiscriminate one against all authority. Third, those disobedient must be public, not secretive, in their actions. Fourth, the participants must be prepared to pay the price of their disobedience. Thus, Thoreau peacefully went to jail rather than pay taxes to a government that supported slavery and fought the Mexican War. These rules hold only for those who engage in civil disobedience, not for their opponents.

What strategies and tactics guide the players? The disobedient must convert the ruling establishment by dramatizing the evil against which they protest. To do this, they must mobilize the sleeping conscience of the political community and destroy support for a government that sanctions immoral acts. This they can do by (1) effectively rallying their own forces, (2) making moral partisans of the neutral and the indifferent, and (3) converting or weakening the position of the immoral ruling elite.

According to advocates of civil disobedience, this general strategy can be implemented when people of conscience cease to obey an unjust government. They do so by

peacefully withdrawing their support “both in person and in property.” They break the law rather than serve as agents of injustice. Some may, as in Thoreau’s case, refuse to pay taxes and be put in jail. Here their purpose is to clog the courts and the jails. Consciences throughout the land will be aroused at the sight of just men and women in jail. A chain reaction will set in as conscientious citizens refuse allegiance to, and conscientious officers resign from, the unjust government. Such action will provide the friction essential for stopping the machinery of government. The ruling elite will be divided and thus weakened. When confronted with the possibility of keeping all just people in jail or of giving up war and slavery, the state will abandon its immoral acts. Blood need not be spilled. If it is, however, it will be spilled by a state that has superior physical strength but not superior moral strength. Thus, moral strength will prevail. Civil disobedience is therefore not only desirable but also feasible.

Practitioners of civil disobedience are moral crusaders. To rally his own forces, Thoreau declares the following:

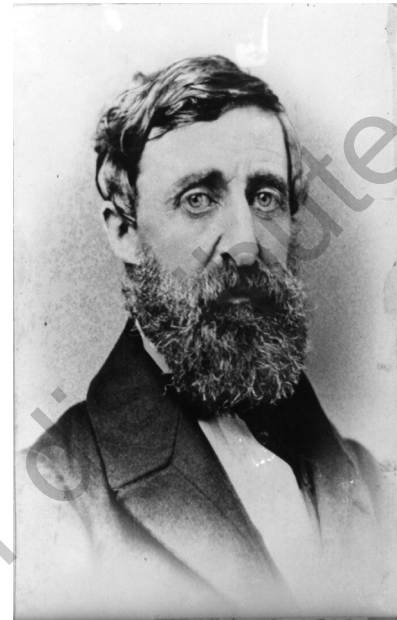
I know this well, that if one thousand, if one hundred, if ten men who I could name—if ten honest men only—ay, if one HONEST man, in this state of Massachusetts, ceasing to hold slaves, were actually to withdraw from this co-partnership, and be locked up in the county jail ... it would be the abolition of slavery in America.

To rouse—indeed, to radicalize—the indifferent, Thoreau writes:

When a sixth of the population of a nation which has undertaken to be a refuge for liberty are slaves, and a whole country is unjustly overrun and conquered by a foreign army, and subjected to military law, I think that it is not too soon for honest men to rebel and revolutionize.

To induce neutral observers to join the cause of the righteous, Thoreau emphasizes several crucial arguments. Moral men and women cannot “recognize that political organization” as their government, “which is the slaves’ government also.” They appreciate that under “a government which imprisons any unjustly, the true place for a just man is also a prison.” To undercut the legitimacy of the immoral government and to convert and weaken the ruling elite, Thoreau appeals to a higher law: “They only can force me who obey a higher law than I.”

Thoreau is aware that his opponents will argue that he rejects democratic and constitutional politics. He knows that they will contend that civil disobedience illustrates a dogmatic, self-righteous position. He anticipates the criticism that civil disobedience is hostile to the normal give-and-take of democracy and constitutional compromise. Thoreau’s critics will argue that he refuses to recognize that just and brave people may not agree about all moral issues in politics and that civil disobedience is incompatible with democratic accommodation and makes for anarchy.



Courtesy of the Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division

This 1856 photograph is one of the few of Henry David Thoreau. Thoreau, the author of a famous essay on civil disobedience, was a vigorous defender of the moral responsibility of individuals to challenge unjust laws. He had a tremendous influence on such later political actors as Mohandas Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr.



Thoreau is ready to repel this counterattack. He insists that it is important to distinguish between minor and major matters in politics. Matters that present no serious moral problem can be handled by majority rule. However, fundamental matters, such as slavery, cannot be left to the ethical competence of majorities. He is not seeking to destroy all aspects of government. As a good citizen, he is quite prepared to pay his highway tax and to educate his fellow citizens. He is aware of the virtues of obedience to the law, of majority rule, of constitutional debate and decision. But a higher law may have to take precedence over civil law. A constitution that recognizes slavery and refuses even to receive petitions protesting slavery does not deserve respect. Thoreau does not “wish to quarrel” or “set myself up as better than my neighbors,” and he seeks to obey the laws of the land. He concedes that “from a lower point of view, the Constitution, with all its faults, is very good; the laws and the courts are very respectable; even this State and this American government are, in many respects, very admirable, and rare things, to be thankful for.” But from the vantage point of a higher law of justice, the Constitution fails.

So Thoreau elaborates the strategy and tactics of civil disobedience. The boldness, as well as the difficulty, of the game is underscored by his basic assumptions: the superior power of conscience in politics, agreement on what is righteous, and the establishment’s ultimate benevolence. He assumes there will be no reactionary backlash and that disobedience will not be brutally repressed.

## Relevance to Modern Politics

As we noted in discussing the game of lion and fox, Machiavelli challenged most of these assumptions. They are also impugned by the Athenians at Melos in the game of wipeout. Yet despite the objections of many people to Thoreau’s assumptions, Martin Luther King Jr. used civil disobedience successfully in the civil rights movement of the 1960s. When employed according to Thoreau’s rules, civil disobedience proved an effective weapon for advancing the rights of African Americans. Moreover, an accumulating literature highlights the success of civil disobedience against a wide variety of authoritarian regimes. Indeed, as we will see more fully in Chapter 13, some scholars maintain that the only sane road to peace and human rights in the nuclear age is through nonviolent civilian defense.

Civil disobedience has also been employed in another highly controversial issue in American society—the morality, lawfulness, and wisdom of abortion. Antiabortion advocates have, for example, used civil disobedience in their protests against abortion clinics. This issue pits prochoice advocates against prolife advocates. The debate involves judgments on a number of troublesome moral and legal questions: whether a fetus is a person and therefore entitled to moral rights and legal protection; how much control a woman has over her own body; how to balance the competing needs of fetus, mother, and other parties; when a fetus is viable; and what to do about life-threatening pregnancies or those caused by rape or incest.

## CONCLUSION

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The games presented in this chapter are educational models. As such, they may help us to understand (1) the character of the major players in politics, (2) the stakes involved in key political games, (3) the rules of politics, and (4) influential strategies and tactics. These games may suggest other variations: for example, balance of power—the politics of equilibrium; class conflict—the politics of domination; stake-in-society—the politics of vested interests; bargaining—the politics of accommodation; miracle, mystery, and authority—the politics of benevolent authoritarianism.<sup>8</sup>

We should remember that the games used in this chapter represent specific cases to illustrate a continuum of political activity. Many other examples could be found throughout history and in the contemporary world that take elements of the three cases used in this chapter. For instance, political activity often combines elements of Machiavelli's cold realism while still holding on to some political ideals to guide action. Keep in mind, also, that the political and legal context in which actions happen affect how we judge those actions. Think of a strike—where an organization or group of people withholds vital services. In the United States, where laws protect unions, the strike is a classic instance of a bargaining tactic that illustrates the accommodation aspect of politics. However, in the early 1980s in Poland, trade union leader Lech Walesa and the Solidarity movement used strikes as a form of civil disobedience that eventually led to the fall of the communist regime in that country and the rise of a new democratic nation.

The games call attention to a number of important ethical, empirical, and prudential problems in politics. They highlight the clash between power and justice. They force us to look critically at “reason of state”—that rationale that prompts leaders of states to protect their nation's vital interests. They force us to ask whether a ruler must accept the “bestly” character of politics and function as both a ferocious lion and an astute fox to protect the state's vital interests. We must decide whether Machiavelli is right in holding that idealism will lead to ruin. The study of these games also entails a deeper look into the ethics and politics of political means. We have to decide if and when the strike is an effective and wise weapon and whether civil disobedience is compatible with majority rule, democratic law, and other time-tested constitutional forms.

Today, we desperately need to clarify the purposes of politics, the uses of power, and the wisdom of policies. In recent years, the ends of political life and the exercise of power have not been keenly criticized. The result has been failure to devise a prudent way to harness power for just and humane purposes. In Chapter 2, we investigate additional scenarios to focus on the problems of political choice.



## KEY QUESTIONS RAISED IN THIS CHAPTER

1. Who are the players in any game of politics? Why do they play as they do? What are their strengths and weaknesses? Answers to these questions can reveal the players' political values, behavior, and judgment.
2. What is the game about? What are the stakes? Life or death? Freedom? Slavery? Peace or War? Prosperity or poverty? Racial equality? Gender equality?
3. How is the game ordered—if it is ordered? Are there rules with limits and penalties for breaking the rules? Are the rules designed to advance order and fairness? Is there an umpire to help order the game?
4. Which strategies are wisest? What is the difference between strategy and tactics?
5. In order to protect national security, is it ever justified to intentionally kill large numbers of civilians? To assassinate the head of another country? To use torture to gain valuable intelligence?
6. Should we accept the doctrine that the end justifies the means—no matter what the end or the means?
7. How realistic is Machiavelli's "realism" and do Machiavellian realist miss important aspects of power because of their narrow understanding of power?
8. Should people rely mainly on civil disobedience to combat what they believe to be outrageous moral evils?
9. In the real world of politics, characterized by a struggle for power, is the risk of civil disobedience worth taking?

## SUGGESTED READINGS

The following novels, plays, and works of philosophy present a wide variety of additional games that politicians play.

Bolt, Robert. *A Man for All Seasons*. New York, NY: Random House, 1966. Highlights the clash between loyalty to conscience (and God) and to king (and country). Also reveals the nobility—and weakness—of reliance on the law in the face of a powerful, determined, and unscrupulous ruler.

Bradbury, Ray. *Fahrenheit 451*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2012. First published 1953 by Ballantine.

Focuses on how people relinquish control of their lives to government. Originally published in 1953, this science-fiction thriller was in the tradition of Orwell's *1984* in that Bradbury places us in a dystopia that outlaws reading as well as free and critical thought. The focus is on how people relinquish control of their lives to government.

Dostoevsky, Fyodor. "The Legend of the Grand Inquisitor." Book 5, Chap. 5 in *The Brothers Karamazov*. New York, NY: Random House, Modern Library Edition, 1950. Contains the grand inquisitor's brilliant (if perverse)

argument that a benevolent authoritarian ruler should relieve inadequate humans of the burden of freedom.

Geuss, Raymond. *Philosophy and Real Politics*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008. Urges students of politics to consider the context and history that define politics and not be held hostage to an otherworldly devotion to ideals.

Golding, William. *Lord of the Flies*. New York, NY: Penguin Group, 1959. Uses a group of shipwrecked boys as an allegory for the evil in all of us and the manner in which we can so easily collectively act on that evil.

Institute for Economics and Peace. *Global Terrorism Index 2020*. Sydney, Australia: IFB, 2020. <http://vision-ofhumanity.org/reports>

Kafka, Franz. *The Castle*. Trans. Willa and Edwin Muir. New York, NY: Knopf, 1930. Addresses the individual's plight in the baffling world of bureaucracy.

Klein, Joe. *Primary Colors: A Novel about Politics*. New York, NY: AOL Time Warner, 1996. The story of an ambitious, womanizing southern politician headed for the White House. Though the book is a work of fiction, its main character bears a remarkable similarity to a recent president of the United States.

Koestler, Arthur. *Darkness at Noon*. Trans. Daphne Hardy. New York, NY: Macmillan, 1941. Illuminates the minds and politics of communist revolutionaries out of power and in power.

Margalit, Avisha. *On Compromise and Rotten Compromises*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010. An engrossing investigation of when political compromises are a good and when such compromises should be rejected.

Orwell, George. *1984*. New York, NY: New American Library, 1951. Another anti-utopian novel that

throws light on the loss of freedom in a totalitarian society.

Shakespeare, William. *Richard III*, 1592; *Julius Caesar*, 1599; *Measure for Measure*, 1604; *Macbeth*, 1605; *Antony and Cleopatra*, 1606; *Coriolanus*, 1607. The games politicians play, as represented in the work of the greatest literary voice in the English language. Highlights political machinations involving the struggle for power and who gets what, when, and how.

Shaw, George Bernard. *Arms and the Man*, 1894; *The Devil's Disciple*, 1897; *Caesar and Cleopatra*, 1899; *Man and Superman*, 1905 (especially that section often produced separately as *Don Juan in Hell*); *Major Barbara*, 1905; *Saint Joan*, 1923. No one play can do justice to Shaw's witty socialist criticism of politics and society. And by all means, read those magnificent lengthy prefaces, which are also great lectures on modern social science.

Sophocles. *Antigone*, c. 441 B.C. A powerful play that illustrates the tragic clash between individual conscience (as informed by a higher law) and public order (as dictated by the need for stability and safety in the community).

Vidal, Gore. *Lincoln, a Novel*. New York, NY: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2000. Offers a comprehensive, historically accurate account of Lincoln's remarkable career in a lively fictional style.

Warren, Robert Penn. *All the King's Men*. New York, NY: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1946. Describes the rise and fall of a southern-style political boss. A fictional political novel based loosely on the very real Louisiana governor Huey Long.

## GLOSSARY TERMS

Accommodation 8  
Civil disobedience 18  
Conversion 8  
Destruction 7  
Ethnic cleansing 8  
Genocide 11

Justice 9  
Lion and fox 14  
Players 6  
Politics 5  
Power 6  
Rules 6

Stakes 6  
Strategies and tactics 6  
Terrorism 7  
Wipeout 9

## NOTES

1. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago, 1918–1956* (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2002). Originally published in the West in 1974.
2. The description here and in the following paragraphs is derived from *The Complete Writings of Thucydides: The Peloponnesian War*, trans. Richard Crowley (New York, NY: Random House, Modern Library Edition, 1951), 330–337.
3. U.S. State Department, *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 1989* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1990), 792.
4. Mark Burgess, “A Brief History of Terrorism,” Center for Defense Information, July 2, 2003, [www.pogo.org/our-work/straus-military-reform-project/cdi-archive/a=brief-history-of-terrorism.html?referrer=https://www.google.com](http://www.pogo.org/our-work/straus-military-reform-project/cdi-archive/a=brief-history-of-terrorism.html?referrer=https://www.google.com).
5. The following discussion is based on Niccolò Machiavelli, “The Prince,” trans. Luigi Ricci and rev. by E. R. P. Vincent, and “The Discourses,” trans. Christian Detmold, in *The Prince and the Discourses* (New York, NY: Random House, Modern Library Edition, 1940).
6. Kathryn Dunn Tenpas, “Tracking Turnover in the Trump Administration” (Washington, DC: Brookings Institute, January 2021. [Brookings.edu/research/tracking-turnover-in-the-trump-administration/](https://www.brookings.edu/research/tracking-turnover-in-the-trump-administration/)).
7. See Henry David Thoreau, “On Civil Disobedience,” in *Walden and Other Writings of Henry David Thoreau* (New York, NY: Random House, Modern Library Edition, 1937).
8. Karl Marx illuminates the game of “class conflict”; Alexander Hamilton, that of “stake-in-society”; Fyodor Dostoevsky, that of “miracle, mystery, and authority.” See, for example, Marx and Engels’s *The Communist Manifesto* (New York, NY: International Publishers Company, Incorporated, 1948); Hamilton’s state papers; and Fyodor Dostoevsky, “Legend of the Grand Inquisitor,” Book 5, Chap. 5 in *The Brothers Karamazov* (New York, NY: Random House, Modern Library Edition, 1950). On Dostoevsky, see also Neal Riemer, “Some Reflections on the Grand Inquisitor and Modern Democratic Theory,” *Ethics* 14, no. 4 (1954–1955): 458–470.

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