

Chapter 1

Introduction to Veil Politics

1.1. POLITICAL VEILS

One of the great monuments found in Washington, DC, is the Lincoln Memorial. Inscribed on the south wall of the monument is the text of the Gettysburg Address, above which is a mural depicting the angel of truth freeing a slave. Engraved on the north wall is the text of Lincoln's Second Inaugural speech. In the middle of the pavilion is the figure of Abraham Lincoln himself, his grave countenance casting a palpable aura over visitors.

The power of artifacts like the Lincoln Memorial to stir the emotions is quite remarkable. But they are not alone in having this power: Novels, plays, films, and even manipulative television advertisements and greeting cards have the same ability to tap into the emotions of spectators. What – if anything – distinguishes civic monuments from artifacts like these? Are monuments of this kind merely public art of a particular kind, or do they serve another function that distinguishes them from other kinds of art?

One way to see what distinguishes civic monuments is to look at their effects. As we might expect, one of the effects of civic memorials is aesthetic. Just as an innovative artwork may please the eye or make us look with new eyes by jarring our sensibilities with new forms and unexpected lines, the Lincoln Memorial appeals to classical standards of proportion and symmetry, while the Vietnam Memorial is startling with its stark simplicity. For many works of art, this aesthetic effect is *all* that is intended – this is art for art's own sake.

Memorials like the Lincoln and the Vietnam War memorials, however, also play a socializing role as well: They are devices that convey particular social, political, and moral values. The Lincoln Memorial, for

Introduction to Veil Politics

instance, is not just a piece of art in an imposing venue. From its stairs rising from the reflecting pool before it to the names of the members of the Union ringing it at the top, the Memorial is an amalgam of symbols that tell a story about the ideals of the United States of America. The statue of Lincoln, as it were, tirelessly delivers his civic lessons to citizens, ceaselessly asking citizens to prove worthy of the fallen in this society, and serving as a physical manifestation of Pericles's statement that "It is by honor, and not by gold, that the helpless end of life is cheered." Simply put, Lincoln is a paideia for the discipline of living alongside one another in this community. The civic lessons he silently delivers to the polity are more than any words that can flow from the lips of a living civic tutor.

This effect is, in part, the result of design; the classical motif and scale of the statue all strike predictable chords in Americans. But design is only partly responsible for the meaning that has been invested in the Memorial and the effect it has on many visitors. The other component is its own history, for the Lincoln Memorial is a living symbol, acquiring new significance as time passes. It is no accident that it was to the steps of the Lincoln Memorial that Martin Luther King, Jr., and other civil rights marchers were drawn during the March on Washington. In the process, they drew upon its significance as a symbol of the promise of America and the sacrifices made for their sake, and at the same time transformed the Memorial, making it a symbol both of the will of the disenfranchised and of entry into full citizenship.

The Lincoln Memorial is a particularly recognizable political symbol, but there are many other less obvious devices that serve similar socializing functions – flags, uniforms, anthems, and pantheons of civic heroes. Indeed, such symbols are present in every state. Where will one find a state in the world without cultural, ethic, or political heroes, without a flag, without a national anthem? These objects, like language, highways, and cars, are found in all states. But unlike highways, languages, and cars, whose functions are apparent, the various functions of things like numismatic symbols, flags, and national anthems may easily be overlooked or dismissed altogether as merely decorative.

Consider, for instance, a simple penny. Its function is most obviously to serve as a medium of exchange or a store of value. But at the same time it is adorned with symbols that are not obviously linked to that role. Incused on the head side is Lincoln's face, gaunt with the burdens of office. Behind the collar of the regalia is carved "Liberty"; a halo of "In God We Trust" adorns the head. On the tail side of the

1.1. Political Veils

penny is a classic-style temple in which a sharp eye can make out the form of Lincoln himself. Above the memorial is a nimbus, “United States of America”; below, the motto of the United States, “E Pluribus Unum.”

Why go to these lengths to adorn a penny? From a practical point of view, there are obvious virtues to using the faces of well-known figures on coins, currency, and stamps. Humans are very good at distinguishing human faces; using a famous figure’s face on media of exchange is, then, an effective way of foiling counterfeiting efforts. But if *this* is the ultimate rationale for adding detail to money, what accounts for the particular images and details used? Other, more notorious historical figures (such as Napoleon Bonaparte or Adolph Hitler) are at least as familiar to most Americans as Lincoln – and are certainly more easily recognized than, say, Andrew Jackson, Alexander Hamilton, or Salmon P. Chase. If familiarity were the fundamental concern, why not place images of *these* persons on currency and coin? If the image of Elvis Presley is appropriate for a first-class stamp, why isn’t it fitting for the dime or the ten dollar bill?

The reason it *isn’t* is that the decisions we make about symbols of this kind are not just utilitarian ones, ones that turn on how easily an image can be forged or recognized. Rather, they also play an important role in shaping our political and moral intuitions; they are, in fact, often explicitly designed and selected with an eye toward valorizing particular images or individuals, all for the purpose of presenting, and thereby subtly upholding, the values and ideals associated with those images.

In this way, the image of Lincoln finds its way into every pocket and every child’s piggybank, and in so doing, various ideals and virtues associated with the image of Lincoln find their way as well into the daily lives of citizens. In a sense, this image becomes invisible, blending as it does into the commonplace background of everyday life. But, like language and the countless other tacit assumptions of everyday life, these unobtrusive images play a role in shaping our values, judgments, and intuitions. Blaise Pascal noted that the best way to develop faith is to go live among the faithful. In a similar way, we might say that the best way to develop the habits, intuitions, and character of a citizen is to live amidst the symbols of a particular polity.

As an illustration of the power of these symbols, consider the way Lincoln’s public image has been transformed since 1860. We live in a world in which Lincoln ranks with the founding fathers in greatness – perhaps surpassed only by Washington in importance. Today there is

Introduction to Veil Politics

no controversy in citing Lincoln as an influence: In an important sense, the legacy of Lincoln is not one that American politicians today need explicitly to embrace, but is one of the “givens” of American politics. During his lifetime, however, and for a time even after his assassination, Lincoln was a deeply divisive political figure.¹ How does such a change come about?

In some respects, this swing from divisive to unifying figure is not so much the result of a change in the public’s sensibilities as it has been a reshaping of Lincoln’s image. That is, it isn’t Lincoln the *man*, with all his complexities and paradoxes, who commands this authority. Rather, it is the iconic *representation* of Lincoln, the backwoods-railsplitter-turned-Great-Emancipator, that has been embraced virtually all along the political spectrum. Clearly, this representation fails to do justice to the complexities of the man; but at the same time, this simplification of the man has conveniently turned Lincoln into a common symbol, one that represents values and ideals that are part of the assumed background to politics in the United States.

This caricature of Lincoln functions as what I shall call a political veil. Real veils are cloth sheets that block a subject’s direct perception of an object. *Political veils* – political symbols, rituals, mythologies, and traditions – serve the same kind of veiling function. But instead of standing between a perceiver and an object, these veils mediate between citizens and a political structure. Where ordinary veils smooth rough edges, mask wrinkles, and highlight a body’s best features, political veils gloss over historical details or aspects of the political apparatus, offering instead an idealized image of the system or a stylized representation of a civic virtue.

Political veils, then, have a dual purpose. Obviously, they have the ability to *hide*, *distort*, or *misrepresent*. Thus, the popular images of the founding fathers typically obscure their foibles and suppress their mistakes to the point that they appear almost superhuman; instead of objective biography, we are given Parson Weems. But this capacity to *obscure* at the same time allows veils to *enhance* perception of the object by setting off its most attractive features. Ordinary frames, pedestals, and other adornments can help to bring an onlooker’s attention to specific

¹ Lincoln’s status is, of course, itself the product of history. For a discussion of the transformation of Lincoln from divisive figure to a kind of apolitical civic hero, see David Herbert Donald’s “Getting Right with Lincoln,” in *Lincoln Reconsidered: Essays on the Civil War Era*, 3rd edition (New York: Vintage Books, 1961).

1.2. Structural and Functional Features of Veils

features of an object. In the same way, a good caricature can often capture quite accurately the essence of a personality or a person's character, notwithstanding its omission of a mass of details.

Veils politics is a style of political practice that recognizes the force of veils and intentionally uses them for political purposes. As a style of political practice, veil politics is not wedded to any particular political content – one may self-consciously use veils for purposes democratic or authoritarian, liberal or totalitarian. Veil politics, then, can be thought of as a means of implementing a particular political system, making the degree to which a system intentionally uses veils – creating, manipulating, and modifying them – lie, as it were, on an axis orthogonal to the political spectrum.

Political veils, then, can be put to many different purposes, depending on the kind of state in which they are used. In a liberal democracy, for instance, they serve to highlight core liberal democratic values and the preferred core narratives of the polity. Through the images of moral and civic exemplars, drawn from mythic or highly idealized history and biography, members of a liberal democracy form affections for such values as respect for the law, civic participation, liberty, cohesion, and solidarity.

Veils are surely not the only way of impressing these values on people, for argument, debate, and deliberation certainly have important roles in this process as well. But veils give us an additional tool, and a particularly powerful one at that. For in the same way that a good caricature may reveal a person's character better than a full biography, fables and myths, dramatic imagery, and art may be far more effective in transmitting civic values and ideals than some more truthful or unadorned representation.

1.2. STRUCTURAL AND FUNCTIONAL FEATURES OF VEILS

To get a better idea of how veils help to instill and support civic values, let us take a closer look at the structure of political veils and the various functions they may serve. Structurally, all veiled objects have a *superficial image* and a *deep image* – the former is what first presents itself to the eye of the onlooker, the latter is the true nature of the object. While all veils share this basic form, their functions may vary considerably, depending on the nature of the veiling. The functions of political veils can (on analogy with the functions of real veils) be distinguished into three

Introduction to Veil Politics

basic types, corresponding to the nature and purpose of the superficial image.

1.2.1. Veils as Aesthetic Adornment

The most straightforward function of veils is to *cover* an object. In many cases, this covering function is used to deceive the viewer by presenting a wholly misleading image of the true nature of the object. But veils used simply as adornment may have a less duplicitous role as well, not to mislead but rather to draw attention to an object that, if presented in an unadorned way, would be overlooked or ignored.

The most obvious qualities used to draw attention are aesthetic ones – ones that appeal to judgments of beauty and aesthetic quality. Because these standards likely vary from place to place, the effectiveness of particular veils will depend on context; standards of beauty applicable in the Florentine Renaissance may be seen as grotesque or repellent by people at another place or time. Veils, then, are a kind of public art that serves a political purpose and is directed at a particular set of people shaped by a common set of customs.

Manipulation of an object's visual qualities may be the most obvious way of veiling, but it is not the only way of presenting an object or institution in a way that makes it more attractive to the public. The *story* or *history* associated with an object can have a similar effect. For instance, the important part of many museum-goers' experience is not the actual material of the artifacts they see, but the *history* of those objects. It is not *just* the beauty of the *Mona Lisa* – nor even the mysterious smile – that draws crowds of tourists, but the way this famous painting is bound up in the viewer's idea of history, culture, and her own place in relation to that history and culture. An insignificant-looking sonnet is seen in a new light once suspected of coming from the pen of Shakespeare; an otherwise worthless object rumored to have been a saint's, a hero's – even a villain's – suddenly acquires a special status.

Just as with appeals to culture-specific standards of beauty, one cannot expect persons who are not *already* steeped in the history and are not *already* well versed in the symbols of a culture to be moved by the political veils used in that culture. Present an average American with an African ceremonial mask displayed in a museum and she is liable to treat it as a purely aesthetic object. What is missing from her experience is an appreciation of the social function such an artifact plays in its own milieu – its role in the community, the values and

1.2. Structural and Functional Features of Veils

practices that it connotes, the history and traditions that it evokes when used.²

In the same way, the experience of civic symbols in the United States – the White House, the Capitol, the Vietnam War Memorial, and others – is for many Americans not *just* an aesthetic one, nor is it one that is independent of their own particular context. Rather, it is an experience shaped by a whole cluster of social, historical, and political features; where someone unfamiliar with U.S. history sees only an impressive statue of Lincoln, another naturally brings to mind the Civil War, the emancipation of slaves, and the dramatic reworking of the United States polity that Lincoln has come to represent.

The associations that make this experience possible are not learned from books or classroom lectures. A citizen doesn't learn to be a patriot – to feel the swell of pride when, at a time of crisis or tragedy, she hears the national anthem or sees the flag – in the way she might memorize a list of dates or a set of multiplication tables. Instead, this process may be more accurately likened to language acquisition, in which citizens learn these associations not by explicit lessons, but by immersion in a complex symbolic milieu.

1.2.2. Veils as Temptations

As adornments, veils can help to make an otherwise unattractive or uninspiring institution or practice more palatable to citizens. Veils can also be used to add mystique to objects, drawing citizens in to investigate and to discover the deep image for themselves. For instance, the status of civil servant, citizen, or soldier may be invested with superficial qualities or significance that tempt people toward them, engaging their attention enough to reveal their more robust deep nature.

The power that veils have to hide aspects of an object or procedure can, then, also exert a powerful attraction. David Hume has noted the deep truth that:

'Tis certain nothing more powerfully animates any affection, than to conceal some part of its object by throwing it into a kind of shade, which at the same time that it shews enough to pre-possess us in favour of the object, leaves still some work for the imagination.³

² See Ajume H. Wingo, "African Art and the Aesthetics of Hiding and Revealing," *British Journal of Aesthetics*, Vol. 38, No. 3 (1998), pp. 251–64.

³ David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1978), p. 422.

Introduction to Veil Politics

Writers, performers, and artists from Alfred Hitchcock to Gypsy Rose Lee all know the power of suggestion – that the best way to fire the imagination is to give the audience not the object itself, but the *hint* of it. When all is visible, nothing is left to the imagination. When only the silhouette and nothing more is given, the individual mind has room to work by itself on an object, endowing it with details of its own creation and drawing the individual in for a closer look.

A veil, in other words, can be characterized by what I have elsewhere called the *aesthetics of hiding and revealing*.⁴ The surface attraction invites investigation, broadcasting the fact that there is something more than what is revealed, the deeper function. The outer surface stimulates the imagination, and by doing so, helps to support the practices veiled in this way.

1.2.3. Veils as Idealizations

One additional purpose that veils may serve is that of an idealization, a simplification of a complex object, practice, doctrine, or figure. The caricature of Lincoln discussed earlier is one such example, as are other stylized representations of civic figures and many popular versions of a state's history. Each elides many details and particulars that any literal account would have to reflect.

The virtue of this kind of simplification or idealization is that by blurring details, they also obscure possible points of conflict among citizens. The superficial image of Lincoln, for instance, is that of the president who preserved the Union and freed the slaves – an image that has come to be embraced by virtually everyone in the United States today. What this image leaves out are many of the more unattractive or controversial qualities of the man – the Lincoln who suspended writs of habeas corpus, who instituted an income tax and dramatically expanded the role of the federal government, whose Emancipation Proclamation freed only those slaves *outside* areas controlled by the Union Army.

This richer, more complex image of Lincoln may be more intellectually satisfying (and is certainly more veridical) than the two-dimensional version found in popular lore. But it should be acknowledged that for *political* purposes, this richer view would do little to help create a common symbol around which Americans of all political views can rally.

⁴ For details, see Wingo, *ibid*.

1.2. Structural and Functional Features of Veils

Adding details simply adds potential points of conflict, and in their role of *obscuring* these sometimes divisive details, political veils help to eliminate some of those sources of disagreement.

1.2.4. One Veil, Multiple Functions

In the preceding sections, I have described three different ways that veils can be used to engage citizens and help to instill in those citizens particular values and ideals. It would be a mistake, however, to assume that any given veil can have only *one* of these functions. More typically, effective political veils will play multiple roles, depending on the individual experiencing them.

For instance, the superficial image of a veil may, by virtue of its aesthetic qualities alone, shape the behavior of casual observers in particular ways; in this case, it functions as an aesthetic adornment. At the same time, however, it may also (either through its aesthetic qualities or the mystique it generates) prompt some curious individuals to investigate the deep image behind the veil; for these individuals, the veil also functions as a temptation.

One risk of this deeper look is disenchantment – what the adorned surface appearance promises to the onlooker, the deep image fails to deliver. But it is also possible for this closer look to support the effect of the surface image, in which case those who penetrate the veil may come to have an even greater appreciation for the object than those guided simply by the superficial appearance. In this latter case, the veil functions as an idealization, a simplified representation that highlights particular features of the object it adorns, presenting those features as that object's more salient or essential qualities.

This ability of a single veil to have different functions makes veils a useful tool for supporting particular political values and ideals in a population in which people differ widely in their abilities and interests. That is, veils provide a means of targeting very different audiences – the casual onlooker and the more skeptical or reflective citizen – in a way that can engage both.

An interesting illustration of this use of veils is in Maimonides's *The Guide for the Perplexed*.⁵ A philosopher and scholar of Judaism in the twelfth century, Maimonides was concerned with what I regard as a

⁵ Moses Maimonides, *The Guide for the Perplexed*, Vol. 1, transl. by Shlomo Pines (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963).

Introduction to Veil Politics

problem of political stability. Specifically, he anticipated that allowing details of the halakha (the part of the Torah concerned with the complexities of the norms of conduct and of religious beliefs) to be accessible to the general population would erode faith. According to Maimonides, the philosophical aptitude required to appreciate these issues correctly are not distributed evenly. Genuine philosophers, he believed, might be capable of sustaining their faith when faced with these complexities and controversies, but genuine philosophers are in short supply. To insist that everyone confront these issues would, then, be to impose a burden on the majority of people who do not want to live the life of contemplation and perhaps even to threaten the established social and political order.

And yet, according to Maimonides, the law is both the ultimate source of cohesion in the Jewish community and a well from which philosophers draw their inspiration for their lives of contemplation. Presenting the law, then, demands doing justice to both roles, without confusing the two. Maimonides's solution was to present the law in an equivocal way, in a manner that provides the practical guidance that the community requires while at the same time giving the philosopher material for thought and reflection. Indeed, he says of his own discussion,

That which is said about all this is in equivocal terms so that the multitude might comprehend them [the laws] in accord with the capacity of their understanding and the weakness of their representation, whereas the perfect man [i.e., the philosopher], who is already informed, will comprehend them otherwise.⁶

As I interpret this passage, Maimonides is attempting to make philosophy available to those with "able minds" while at the same time maintaining public faith in the laws that are necessary for the survival of the community of which the philosopher is a part. Thus, he writes:

A sage accordingly said that a saying uttered with a view to two meanings is like an apple of gold overlaid with silver filigree-work having very small holes . . . the external meaning ought to be as beautiful as silver, while the internal meaning ought to be more beautiful than the external one, the former being in comparison to the latter as gold is to silver. *Its external meaning ought to contain in it something that indicates to someone considering it what is to be found in its internal meaning, as happens in the case of an apple of gold overlaid with silver filigree-work having very small holes. When looked at from a distance or with imperfect attention, it is deemed to be an apple of silver; but when a full sighted observer looks at it with full attention,*

⁶ Ibid., p. 9, my emphasis.