Veil Politics in Liberal Democratic States

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With Preface by
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CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA
477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia
Ruiz de Alarcón 13, 28014 Madrid, Spain
Dock House, The Waterfront, Cape Town 8001, South Africa

http://www.cambridge.org

First published 2003

Printed in the United States of America

Typeface Palatino 10/13 pt. *System* LaTeX 2ε [TB]

A catalog record for this book is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication data available

ISBN 0 521 81438 3 hardback
ISBN 0 521 89128 0 paperback

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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

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

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

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).

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

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

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.

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.

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).

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.

its interior becomes clear to him and he knows that it is gold. The parables of the prophets . . . are similar. *Their external meaning contains wisdom that is useful in many respects, among which is the welfare of human societies, as is shown by the external meaning of [p]roverbs* [sic] *and of similar sayings. Their internal meaning, on the other hand, contains wisdom that is useful for beliefs concerned with the truth as is*.[7]

Maimonides's presentation of the law itself can be seen as a sort of veil with multiple functions. Its superficial image operates on those individuals whose capacities do not allow them to understand the complex "philosophical" aspects of the law, allowing them to sustain a stable and well-ordered community. At the same time, those who realize that the superficial image of the law is composed of mere parables, myths, or tradition will also see (by virtue of their philosophical training) the ultimate importance of those myths and traditions for sustaining the social and political order. While there is a danger that those who "see through" the veil will suffer disenchantment and lose faith, this deeper understanding – the recognition of the "gold" that underlies the "silver" surface – should ultimately *enhance* their faith in the laws.

In the preceding quotation, Maimonides captures some of the important possibilities of political veils. These veils are not intended to bar individuals from seeing through them, but neither are they intended to pull the unwilling into a deeper investigation of the law. Instead, they are designed to respond to whatever disposition individuals may have, and do so in ways that guide people of many different interests, backgrounds, and abilities to a common goal. Those individuals who are engaged in theoretical life (what Aristotle refers to as "the life of contemplation") will be able to penetrate the veils via these "holes." But obstacles should be set up so that only those whose faith will not be undermined by seeing the truth will be able to do so.[8]

1.3. VEIL POLITICS IN PRACTICE

As I have presented them, political veils work in a variety of way to support a political structure. To a certain extent, the effectiveness of veils depends on their being unobtrusive, blending into the background of

[7] Ibid., p. 12, my emphasis.

[8] This view of veiled objects as having a "double meaning" is echoed by Leo Strauss, who has a similar view of texts and histories as having two layers of meaning, with one accessible to the masses and the other open only to the "elites."

our ordinary lives in a way that makes the values they stand for part of what we take for granted.

Another important factor that contributes to their effectiveness is their forming an interlocking network or tapestry of symbols and images that, taken as a whole, reflect the virtues, principles, and ideals of the political structure. If one wants to see the role played by these liberal democratic veils, one shouldn't look at a patch here or a thread there (the Lincoln numismatic symbol, for example). The full effect comes to light only when one takes the mass of discrete symbols – the sacred civic spaces, hallowed buildings such as the White House and the Capitol, and sacrosanct objects like the American flag – as a whole. Only then can one begin to feel the weight of veils and start to appreciate the extent to which political symbols appear all around us.

The basic function I am claiming for political veils is to serve as a means of effectively embedding the polity's values in the lives of citizens until the values of that polity are second nature to them. Like argumentation and open debate of issues, veils are a special way of inviting people to reflect upon proposals and to take action. Like rational political debate, the end of veils is action or behavior of a particular kind; their purpose is to persuade citizens to take those actions, to behave in the requisite way. Unlike argumentation, however, veils bypass the explicit use of rational faculties, instead appealing to symbols and images that have been invested with meaning and emotional significance to shape the actions, habits, and character of citizens.

Thinking in terms of veils and being attuned to their effect on the basic character of citizens lends considerable importance to what otherwise might seem to be purely ceremonial gestures or rhetorical flourishes. For instance, recall the heated debate and deliberation concerning the design of the FDR Memorial in Washington, D.C., and the passionate arguments surrounding the construction of a World War II Memorial on the Mall. Can mere differences in aesthetic judgments account for the passions that these debates elicit? Or is there something more at stake in these arguments?

Recall also how Martin Luther King, Jr., and the civil rights marchers waved American flags and sang patriotic songs as they marched to the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C. There, in his "I Have a Dream" speech, King called on living Americans to honor the promises made by their own civic heroes who founded this nation by accepting African Americans as full citizens in the nation of their birth. King's claim for social and political justice had no need of this location or his

eloquent oratory for its justification. But it did need those trappings to be heard by the rest of America.

Opening our eyes to the veils that surround us everyday, it becomes clear that the business of making, manipulating, and modifying veils is hardly new. It is as old as the idea that to motivate people to action, one must appeal to things familiar and dear to them – their customs, their traditions, their image of themselves. *Political myths*, for instance, have long been acknowledged to have instrumental value in mobilizing people to action. These myths do not merely entertain – although good myths surely do that. They also have a didactic function, teaching lessons of virtue, morals, and character.

Classical mythology can be read as a rich study of general human psychology that embeds deep truths about human nature in an entertaining and vivid story. In much the same way, political myths function as veils embedding the values and purposes of a community in stories that can engage even the least civic-minded citizens. Myths typically present the origins of a society in ways that flatter the people who live in it, representing their community as part of a divine plan or as the legacy of a hardy, virtuous race of heroes who tamed the wild frontier. As fabricated stories of a community's beginnings, however, these tales actually speak to that society's end – its aims, values, and purposes.

Political symbols are another kind of veil. These provide ways to objectify myths or stand in for particular persons or institutions. In this role of "placeholder," the symbol often comes to be treated not merely as a mark, but as much more: People begin to associate it with objects or narratives that appear with it. Further, the way political symbols are deployed or used alters their own significance as well as that of others. Sometimes this amounts to "transferring" feelings associated with it to other things, as happens when a struggling politician figuratively wraps herself in the flag; at other times this path is reversed, and a previously insignificant symbol acquires meaning merely by its association with an event or figure. Such symbols have no fixed, invariant meaning but rather can take on different ones at different times, depending on the variety of situations within which they are used.

Political rhetoric is another device that functions as a kind of veil. Great orations are more than the text on the page or teleprompter, and their greatness depends not just on the argument being made, but on the way the argument is presented. The art of oratory is that of drawing on familiar themes, structures, and symbols, using the invested significance of those elements either to engage the audience or to reshape the meanings

of those elements themselves to make the audience think in new ways about old issues. Like other political veils, however, effective political rhetoric overlays the content of a speech with a façade, one that may either obscure the true content or serve as a more effective "delivery device" than unadorned speech.[9]

Political rituals constitute yet another class of political veils. As characterized by David Kertzer, rituals of this kind are actions performed by people within a political unit; these actions are "highly structured, standardized sequences and [are] often enacted at certain places and times that are themselves endowed with special symbolic meaning."[10] Rituals in general (not just political ones) owe much of their power to the fact that as repetitions, they quickly work their way into the routine patterns of everyday life. Political rituals exploit this to good effect, often centering on the reenactment of some mythic event, such as the celebration of the "birth of a country" or what is popularly known in the West as an "Independence Day." Other rituals include the singing of patriotic songs such as the national anthem at sporting events and the ceremonial trappings of inaugurations. Parades celebrating national holidays, the protocol surrounding state visits, the pomp and circumstance of presidential inaugurations, parliamentary practices – all belong to the long list of rituals and symbols that exist in liberal democratic societies.

Finally, I note that certain kinds of *civic pedagogy* are closely related to the practice of veil politics; this is a topic I explore in much greater detail in Chapter 5.[11] For now, I will simply note that the purpose of civic education is to "align" the aims and values of children – future full members of the state – with the state's fundamental political values. By transmitting these values from one generation to the next, a program of civic education can be thought of as a way of *reproducing* the state.

As I will argue in Chapter 5, one effective means of doing this is to develop dispositions to respond in specific ways to particular symbols or ideas, and then to forge a link between those symbols and the values

[9] I do not mean to suggest that *all* political speeches are veiled in this way. In many contexts, rhetorical flourishes would be counterproductive. That said, however, it should also be noted that the image of the plain-spoken, almost inarticulate "man of the people" is often just another type of veil: a public representation of guileless virtue.

[10] David I. Kertzer, *Ritual, Politics and Power* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1988), p. 9.

[11] Note that civic pedagogy does intertwine with tradition; however, I will discuss it separately for reasons that will become clear in Chapter 5.

of interest. Such a program of civic pedagogy that uses veils is, I will argue, of great value in a liberal democracy, since it gives us a way to engender the central civic values of a liberal democracy without having to resort to coercion.

1.4. VEILS AND LIBERALISM – AN ESSENTIAL TENSION?

As I have characterized them, political veils appeal to emotional and aesthetic reactions to initiate, strengthen, and enhance feelings such as solidarity, pride, and reverence.

Veils are also what I call *conceptually ambiguous*, in the sense that different persons may have similar overt reactions to a single veil, yet have very different thoughts about it. The woman facing the flag and singing the national anthem next to me at the start of a baseball game may have beliefs about what that flag and anthem – and the country they represent – stand for that are very different from my own. Yet singing together and honoring the same flag brings the two of us together in an important way. These common symbols are, as it were, vessels that we can share while still filling them with very different contents. This ambiguity allows diverse people to have a common emotional or behavioral reaction to the veil despite their dramatically different beliefs and desires.[12]

Veils, then, are a means of persuasion that, in an important sense, circumvent rational faculties. They are, if not necessarily malicious deceptions and manipulation, at least something less than the truth, playing more to habits, emotions, and intuitions than to reason. They are pictures or images that foster a particular way of looking at and living in the world. Residing in the non-rational realm, they have a nature that is difficult to capture in the philosopher's usual categories of rationality and irrationality, and next to impossible to govern with the inflexible laws of logic.

As such, an obvious objection to the use of veils in a liberal democracy is that it is a threat to autonomy and self-determination. After all, it seems

[12] For a discussion of the differences between the emotive and the conceptual meanings of concepts, see C. L. Stevenson, "Persuasive Definitions," *Mind*, Vol. 47, No. 187 (July, 1938), p. 331. See also Jeremy Waldron's "Indirect Discrimination," in *Equality and Discrimination: Essays in Freedom and Justice*, eds. Stephan Guest and Alan Milne (Philadelphia, PA: Coronet Books, 1985), pp. 93–100.

that the very legitimacy of the liberal state and its powers rests on the consent of individuals endowed with reason and the ability to scrutinize the status quo with a critical eye. Intentional efforts to play to the non-rational aspects of citizens, be it through subtle rhetorical methods or blatant appeals to fear and jealousy, violate at least the spirit of liberal democracy.

The threat posed by veils to the principles of liberal democracy is quite real, for mythic narratives have long been used for highly illiberal purposes. European kings and their descendants, for example, attempted to justify their rule by appealing to myths of divine authority. Since their rule depended on their subjects (and perhaps even themselves) believing this myth, it had to be impenetrable. In terms of veils, this story of origins had to be opaque, one that could hide completely the facts that lay beyond it.

Opacity politics is a particular version of veil politics, one that employs methods aimed at deceiving the public by replacing harsh, unpalatable realities with more acceptable images. Thus, the absolute power wielded by the tyrant is presented as the natural authority due to the hand-picked temporal representative of the gods, *not* as the result of a combination of brutal opportunism and historical accident. The monarch commands allegiance by being chosen by God to lead, *not* because he can crush opposition. In these cases, the purpose of these opaque facades is to mask facts because they are too awful to stand the light of the day; they hide these facts because revealing them would be a direct threat to the political structure.

In extreme cases, it may be that the myth is essential to the state, and debunking it would knock the foundations out from under the whole political structure. This may have been the case in Imperial Japan, where the belief in the divine nature of the Emperor was a key element underlying his (and the government's) authority. A perhaps less extreme case is that of the lies that the U.S. government told the public during the Vietnam War about the number of casualties and the progress of the war. When these were revealed as lies, it was natural for citizens to doubt the sincerity of the entire governmental apparatus.

1.4.1. Opacity and Transparency Politics

Using veils to hide that which is too awful to show constitutes a special case of veil politics, one that I shall call *opacity politics*. Like veil politics in general, opacity politics is a style of political practice that makes