3. Power

The question which most sharply divides radicals from liberals in modern America is well expressed in the title of Robert Dahl's influential study of New Haven politics: Who Governs? The traditional liberal view, from the eighteenth-century notion of separation of powers to Galbraith's modern theory of countervailing powers, has been that power in the United States is diffused and scattered among a plurality of competing interests and elites so that no single group acquires a monopoly of control, and no significant segment of the population is entirely excluded from the exercise of political power. By contrast, the common theme of radical critics is the existence of a concentration of power in the hands of a class or interlocking set of factions whose will is imposed on the people behind a facade of ineffectual democratic institutions. C. Wright Mills crystallized this essay is an expanded and revised version of "An Analysis of the Concept of Political Loyalty" in my Political Man and Social Men, © copyright 1966 by Random House, Inc., and used here by permission.

that the radical theory for American readers with his enormously influential book, The Power Elite. Since then, the English term "Establishment" has been adopted to describe the supposed domination of American life by a system of private and public institutions whose governors shuttle from executive suite to executive suite in a closed circle from which the great mass of ordinary Americans are quite thoroughly excluded. Recently, the term "Power Structure" has been taken over by the more militant leaders of the Negro movement as a label for the white leaders who block escape from the ghetto and control the jobs and homes for which the slum dweller reaches out.

It would be easy to interpret this apparent opposition of views as merely a rhetorical war of words growing out of differing emphases on essentially the same picture of American life. The liberals, after all, are quite well aware that political power is unevenly distributed among American citizens, and radicals, when pressed, will acknowledge that there is no cabal or conscious conspiracy manipulating a docile public. Perhaps we have here no more than a difference of temperament. Liberals tend to emphasize the stability of the American political system and its responsiveness to pressures from aroused citizens; radicals are enraged by the misery and injustice which flourish in the midst of such wealth, and refuse to relax into attitudes of self-congratulation when confronted by so great a gulf between what is and what could be.

Such a resolution of the disagreement would be easy, but it would also be wrong. Behind the rhetoric lies a genuine dispute, not so much over the actual nature of American politics, but rather over the norms or standards by which a modern political society should be judged. To be sure, the issue is hopelessly confused by the conceptual imprecision with which it is debated, but the instincts of
the participants are accurate. Radicals and liberals really do go separate ways over the question of political power. If we are to evaluate the soundness of modern liberal philosophy, we must attempt to come to grips with the concept of power.

Instead of launching a frontal attack on the concept of power, let us approach the subject obliquely by explicating the notion of an "object of decision." By an object of decision I mean any event or state of affairs which someone or other is in a position actually to choose to bring about. For example, I can if I choose walk from my study to my kitchen and pour myself a glass of beer. Therefore, my having a beer is an object of my decision. Similarly, I can if I choose buy a car, although it will strain my resources to do so. So my buying a car is also an object of my decision. On the other hand, I cannot as things now stand choose to run a mile in four minutes or play the Beethoven violin concerto flawlessly. Therefore those things are not objects of my decision.

There is virtually no state of affairs or event which is an object of decision for every single person, although there are countless things which are objects of no one's decision at all. For example, no one at the moment has it within his ability to choose to vacation on the moon, while some unfortunate people cannot even choose to take a breath or open their eyes. Obviously also there are many things which groups of people can choose to do as groups, but which no single individual can choose to do. Some of these, like playing a game of baseball or having a discussion, logically require several people for their accomplishment. Others, like lifting a truck, simply happen as a matter of fact to require the cooperation of a number of individuals.

In addition, there are some things which are not actually within a given individual's scope of choice, despite the fact that he is legally authorized to choose them and his right to do so is acknowledged by everyone around him. It is a commonplace of American politics, for example, that the powers which the Constitution and laws give to the President are far in excess of his real ability to translate his will into practice. Every new incumbent discovers the mysterious capacity of even the most precise directives to disappear without trace into the innards of the State Department. Robert McNamara earned himself a permanent place in history merely by exercising in fact a measure of the authority which every previous Secretary of Defense had exercised only in theory.

Many of the uncertainties and ambiguities which beset the notion of power are present as well in the notion of an object of decision. If the only advantage enjoyed by Secretary McNamara over his predecessors was his superior administrative skill, should we say that effective management of the Department of Defense was, or was not, a real object of their choice? To take another example, if I can bring about some state of affairs only by employing means which, for some reason or other, I consider unacceptable, is that state of affairs an object of my decision or not? A complete analysis of the concept of power would require that these ambiguities be diminished, but for our purposes it will be possible to put them to one side and develop other implications of the notion of an object of decision.

Of particular importance is the case of the event or state of affairs which is a consequence of decisions, but yet is not itself an object of decision. This is the "unintended consequence" which economists and sociological theorists have made so much of in their analyses of large-scale social behavior. A traffic jam, for example, is the consequence of
are not, save under the most unusual of circumstances, matters of major social importance, but the actions of the President are. Among matters which are currently objects of someone's decision, the level of federal taxation is of major importance while the marital life of the President's daughter is not (though it may, of course, be a matter of major public curiosity). The distinction is patent and precise, and I do not wish to pretend by the elaboration of technical jargon that it can be made much more precise. Nevertheless, I shall persist in employing it because, as we shall see presently, it is indispensable to an analysis of the concept of political power.

It might be worth pointing out that the notion of a matter of major social importance, in addition to being imprecise, is also relative to the values and interests of the members of the society. In the United States, for example, virtually everything related to the overall size and distribution of the gross national product qualifies as a matter of major social importance, but in a devoutly religious society which cared little for material wealth, signs of divine favor or disfavor might far outweigh in importance more fluctuations in production. Some of the most intractable social disputes concern the relative ranking of different matters rather than the choice of a course of action with regard to any one of them.

Any adequate analysis of the distribution of political power in American society would require an investigation of the sorts of matters of major social importance which are, and are not, objects of someone's decision. There are, after all, two questions which can always be asked about any event or state of affairs: First, is it an object of anyone's decision at all? and Second, who decides it? I suggest that which matters are objects of someone's decision in a society is a more significant fact about that society than who de-
cides them. Hence, modern Russia strikes us as more like modern America than either society is like its eighteenth-century counterpart.

Indeed, there is something like a law of historical development—one of the very few—to the effect that once a matter of major social importance becomes an object of decision, it never reverts to the status of fact of nature or unintended consequence. This might also be called the law of the progress of rationality, for there is a fundamental sense of the term “rational” in which “to be rational” means “to be the author of one’s actions, to act rather than to be acted upon.” To become more rational, in this root sense, means to transform into ends things which previously were not ends. A man becomes more rational just insofar as he brings within the scope of his will some datum of experience which previously confronted him as independent of his will.

Once any feature of the social world is known to be within human control, it is irrevocably an object of decision, so that even the failure to act with regard to it becomes a deliberate decision. For example, so long as a government is ignorant of the technique of controlling the volume of money in the economy, it must view that fact of social life

* Liberals, by and large, employ only the more superficial notion of rationality as the fitting of means to ends. In this sense of the term, rationality is equivalent to efficiency. Ends or goals are viewed as given by feeling, and hence not open to rational deliberation. From this identification of goals with feelings and means with reason, it is not a very long step to the much-celebrated value neutrality with which modern liberal social scientists emulate their research. They are unable, for example, to see that a society which fails even to set itself certain social goals—which fails, that is, to make certain matters of importance objects of collective decision—is to that extent an irrational society. Naturally, since they cannot see this fact, they cannot undertake as social scientists to explain it. Hence, they remain at the level of predicting variations in public preferences among toothpastes or presidential candidates.

as on a par with the weather. But once it learns the trick of expanding or contracting bank loans, the volume of money is now after an object of decision, whether it chooses to avail itself of its ability or not. The willingness to recognize this fact, as we shall see, distinguishes political conservatives from political reactionaries.

Irreversible historical progress, as opposed merely to historical alteration, takes place when some matter of major social importance first becomes an object of someone’s decision within the society. The most striking series of such extensions of rational decision is to be found in the area of economic activity. Initially, men find themselves engaged in production and exchange. Gradually, they become aware of apparently objective laws governing the relations of prices, wages, profits, and interest levels in the market. What seem to them at first to be iron laws, as foolish as fatal as the laws of physics, slowly are recognized as possible objects of collective decision. The total production of goods and services in a society—its Gross National Product—is of course a consequence of the economic decisions of acts in the market, but it can also itself be an object of social decision. Even so abstract a fact as the annual rate of growth of the CNP may become a direct object of deliberate decision. As knowledge grows and modes of collective action are devised, there is a steady expansion of the realm of decision. So in the history of society the conception of babies is first an inexplicable accident, then an uncontrollable outcome of natural human activities, then a planned event, and finally a part of a national policy regulating the birthrate.

Eventually, through a generalization from social experience, the general concept of a social problem may be formulated. There is a natural series of stages through which each problem progresses. First the problem is identified. In some cases, the recognition of a problem may require nothing
more than a deep breath of polluted city air or a brief ride through ghetto slums. In other cases, however, only refined techniques of statistical analysis will reveal the existence of the problem, as when comparisons are made of rates of unemployment among Negro and white workers, or when infant mortality rates in the United States and Scandinavia are contrasted. Next, the causal determinants of the phenomena under examination are discovered, finally, ways are found to make the phenomena objects of social decision. At this point, what was initially a fact of society has become a subject of policy deliberation. Once such a transformation has been achieved, there is no going back. The age of social innocence is lost, and from that moment any decision, including the decision to do nothing, is a deliberate policy for which the authors of the decision can be held responsible.

At any point in the history of a society, there will be a body of matters of major social importance which are clearly objects of someone’s decision, and a number of not-yet-determinate matters which are for the first time being brought within the sphere of rational choice. A conservative, generally speaking, is a man who resists bringing new matters of importance within the scope of decision. For reasons either of tradition or of timidity, or from a frequently well-grounded fear of the loss of social innocence, he prefers to see even quite important matters left to the interplay of individual decisions. To the conservative, unintended consequences are preferable to deliberate decisions. The reactionary, on the other hand, is a man who indulges in the fantasy of returning to a time of innocence before some matter of social importance became an object of decision. He literally wishes to turn the clock back, and of course he is doomed to perpetual disappointment. Before the development of modern economic theory, governments were unable to control the cycle of booms and busts which dominated nineteenth-century Europe and America. Now that we know how to dampen the fluctuations, we can, as a deliberate policy, choose to allow the full swing of inflation and depression, but we can never return to the time when the CNP was an uncontrollable fact of nature.

We sympathize with the reactionary, of course. It is pleasant to be relieved of the burden of deciding things, and even death, in so far as it cannot be controlled, offers a certain security. But knowledge once stolen cannot be returned, as Adam and Eve discovered.

II

Now let us turn directly to the concept of political power. Since we are interested in choice, decision, and purposeful action, we are not concerned with the sort of power an engine is said to have, or with the force exerted by a lever. In the most general sense, the sort of power we wish to analyze is the ability to make and enforce decisions. Political power, then, can best be understood as the power to make and enforce decisions with regard to matters of major social importance. (Hence the necessity of introducing this admittedly vague term.) It is tempting, but I think mistaken, to define political power in terms of access to, or control of, the formal institutions of law and government in a society. The trouble with such a definition is that it manages to beg the very questions about the real locus of political power.

* The analysis developed in this section is quite similar in some respects to Robert Dahl’s analysis of the concept of power in his essay, “The Concept of Power,” Behavioral Science, July, 1957. Although I have very great differences with Professor Dahl on the nature of political power, particularly as it manifests itself in contemporary America, I would be remiss in failing to acknowledge the precision and subtlety of his essay. In later sections of this chapter I shall try to indicate just where we part company.
which our analysis is designed to answer. We must not assume in advance that those who control the legal and governmental institutions of a modern state exercise effective power of decision over virtually all the matters of major social importance which are objects of decision at all. That may be true, but we wish to define political power in such a way that it becomes an empirical truth and not a trivial tautology. It is at least logically possible that the locus of such power be elsewhere than in the halls of government, for example in the meeting rooms of corporate directorates if some radical critics of American society are right. By defining political power as the ability to make and enforce decisions concerning matters of major social importance, we leave it open whether political power has anything at all to do with what is ordinarily called politics.

When I introduced the notion of a matter of major social importance, I pointed out that it was both vague and relative to the interests and values of the society. In addition to this, it is also unavoidably evaluative. Since most contemporary social scientists aspire to the condition of methodological grace known as value-neutrality, it might be worth devoting a few words to defending a definition of political power which rests on a frankly non-value-neutral concept.

The dispute over the thesis of the power elite obviously involves some sorts of assumptions about the relative importance of various matters of decision. No one in his right mind would attempt to refute the claim that Stalin was a dictator by pointing out that millions of Russian citizens made countless individual decisions about when to rise, whom to marry, and what to eat. The point is that so far as politics is concerned, Stalin made more decisions about important matters than anyone else did, and he showed himself capable of enforcing his decisions against opposition from other major political figures in Russian society. But suppose someone argued that Congress, in the past decade, had made virtually no decisions about matters of truly major importance, and that instead the power of decision had shifted completely to the President and his Administration. Those who rank the Cuban missile crisis, the Cuban invasion, and the Vietnam war far above the assortment of New Frontier and Great Society social legislation in importance might agree with this judgment, and they might conclude that the relative inability of Congress to call the tune in military and foreign policy meant an end to genuine parliamentary democracy in America. Those, on the other hand, who assigned greater importance to the domestic developments of recent years might insist that Congress retained significant power over matters of major social importance, and hence possessed considerable political power. To some extent, of course, the dispute is over facts: Does the mood of Congress restrain the President more severely in foreign policy than appears on the surface? Will the social legislation have no lasting effect on American life, or is it the first wave of a tide which will transform America? But at bottom, there is an ineradicable evaluative dimension to the argument. Radicals and liberals are not so far apart in their values as, say, Bolsheviks and Czars, but they do genuinely disagree. Hence any dispute between them about the nature and location of political power will in part be a dispute over what is important, what is worth trying to control, in modern society.

Faced with this necessity of introducing value judgments into the very foundations of his work, the liberal social scientist is liable to attempt to retreat into "objectivity." The consequence, unfortunately, is merely that he replaces his own evaluations with what Galbraith so neatly labels the "conventional wisdom." He simply adopts unthink-
ly the consensus gentium of the moment. If everyone is talking about the decisions of war and peace, he studies the process of decision in the Pentagon. When interest shifts to urban renewal, he launches a foundation-supported investigation of the dynamics of City Hall politics. One of the curious effects of this false objectivity is the creation of the myth that the liberal center is populated by objective, value-neutral seekers after the truth, whereas the right and left wings are manned by impassioned (and hence biased) crusaders whose study of society is motivated by a quite unscientific moral concern. (The truth, as Max Weber pointed out some time ago, is that every investigation of social phenomena involves some evaluative judgment as to which problems, distinctions, categories are important.) The very concept of a “power elite” presupposes, as we shall see, some assumptions about how power should be distributed in a society. A political scientist could as easily discuss political power in America without making some judgments about what is and is not important as an art historian could discuss the history of art without making some judgments about what is and is not beautiful.

We are finally in a position to examine the dispute over the thesis of the power elite. Drawing on the definitions and clarifications that we have just developed, we can define a power elite as a group of persons who together decide most of the matters of major social importance which are objects of anyone’s decision at all. If, in addition, this group exhibits the familiar marks of social cohesion, including common origins, interlocking familial alliances, common lifestyles, educational experiences, and economic level, we may call them a Ruling Class. Such a class need not be hereditary, although experience suggests that it will do its best to make itself so. But at the very least, entry to its ranks must be by cooptation rather than independent effort, so that it can truly be said to control its membership and its perpetuation. Nor need this elite be fully self-conscious of itself as such; group- or class-consciousness is hardly a necessary condition for the existence of a ruling class. And it goes without saying that the members of the elite need not be partners to anything resembling a conspiracy. The concept of a power elite, or ruling class, is an objective concept purporting to describe the actual distribution of political power, not a subjective concept characterizing men’s beliefs about that distribution.

Very simply, then, C. Wright Mills maintains that the United States is ruled by a power elite which exhibits many, if not all, of the characteristics of a ruling class. Most of the decisions concerning matters of major social importance are made by this elite, which operates sometimes in full view, sometimes behind the scenes. The decision-making activities of supposed power centers such as Congress are limited to matters of middling social importance. There are a great many such decisions to be sure, but neither individually nor in sum do they amount to much. The real power—which is to say, the power of decision over matters of major importance—is vested in a relatively small group of men occupying the “command posts” of industry, the military establishment, and the Administration. The ruling elite is not a cabal or a clique; it may even be torn by internal dissension. Nevertheless, it has a common political

Notice that one cannot even formulate the power elite thesis without committing oneself to evaluation of the relative social importance of various objects of decision. No one denies that some decisions he outside the control of Congress, the question is only whether all the important decisions do. Now also, contrary to the beliefs of many “objectivists” liberals, that it is impossible to deny the thesis unless one makes some contrary evaluative assumption.
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Ideology, pursues a single broad line of policy, exhibits considerable social cohesion, and circulates its membership more and more freely among the top positions of the several hierarchies of power. Generals move into presidential politics and corporate directorates, industrial magnates take key cabinet posts, top politicians become corporate directors. Entrance into the elite is partially hereditary, partially by cooptation. Despite the appearance of democratic forms in the distribution and exercise of power, American politics is in fact the sovereign domain of this self-perpetuating elite. It is only marginally responsible at best to the people it purports to serve, and it employs a variety of coercive and persuasive devices to protect itself from invasion from below.

Mills' book provoked considerable response, to put it mildly. Despite some praise from other radical critics of the American dream, the reviews were predominantly negative. Liberals advanced three sorts of objections to Mills' thesis: first, it was argued that he left the concept of power unanalyzed and unprovided with operational tests for its application; second, Mills' account of the concentration of political power in the hands of a small elite was rejected as empirically false—quite to the contrary, power could be seen to be divided into countervailing powers or distributed among competing interest groups; and finally, by concentrating on the social origins and status insignia of his "elite" instead of examining the process of decision-making in which they engaged, Mills allowed himself to ignore the degree to which the major decisions reflected either a common social interest or else a confluence of competing group

and private interests. It was also pointed out by a number of critics that Mills drew his examples of decisions by the power elite exclusively from the area of foreign and military affairs, where decisions are vested constitutionally not even in an elite or ruling class but in one man, the President, and his advisers.

Since the initial dispute, something of a radical counter-reply has been developed by social critics who admired Mills' work but felt that it needed buttressing. Ignoring the first objection, they have presented two sorts of arguments in support of Mills. The claims concerning the concentration of political power have been defended by studies both of local communities, particularly in the big urban centers where Negro populations are denied access to the centers of power and decision, and also of such high policy decisions as the dropping of the atom bomb on Japan, the armament of the United States in the fifties, and the progressive escalation of the war in Vietnam. The pluralist model of competing and countervailing interest groups has been denied any relevance to either the highest or the lowest levels of decision-making. And in the past decade, it has been at those two levels, rather than at the intermediate level of Congressional decision, that the most pressing social problems have arisen.

At the same time, a number of authors have come forward with detailed statistical justifications of Mills' rather impressionistic portrait of the "higher circles." Studies of the distribution of wealth, career lines, educational and social habits, and residential patterns in American society are offered to confirm Mills' claim that the occupants of the seats of power constitute something approaching a genuine social class.

Without engaging in a full-scale review of the literature, let me simply offer my judgment that here, as in many
other cases, the factual disputes remain inconclusive because of a prior failure to clarify the central concepts of the disagreement. In Chapter 4, I shall offer my estimate of the strengths and weaknesses of the pluralist theory of American democracy. In the present chapter, therefore, I shall concentrate the remainder of my discussion on the conceptual unclarity of the notion of a power elite. Anticipating somewhat, I shall try to show that the liberals are right to deny the existence of a power elite, but they are right for wrong reasons. Mills and the radicals, by contrast, are wrong, but in a sense they are right for the right reasons. I trust that this conclusion will not seem too much like a cautious stroll down the middle of the road.

The best attack on the concept of the power elite from the liberal camp was mounted by Robert Dahl. In an essay entitled “A Critique of the Ruling Elite Model,” appearing a year after the analysis of “The Concept of Power” cited above, Dahl suggests some ways in which the notion of a ruling elite could be transformed into an operational concept with explicit criteria of confirmation and disconfirmation. Although Dahl merely formulates possible criteria and concludes the essay with the modest remark that the evidence for an American power elite has not yet been examined, he quite clearly doubts that Mills or anyone else can find adequate empirical confirmation for the dramatic claims advanced by the radical critics.

In order to make sense of the hypothesis that some men have power over others, Dahl argues, it is necessary first to specify the scope of the power (i.e., the set of objects of decision, in my terminology). Dahl employs, unanalyzed, the notion of “key political issues” as a way of delineating the scope of the power elite theory. If I understand him correctly, Dahl means by a “key political issue” something rather like what I mean by a “matter of major social importance,” except that his language obscures the fact previously mentioned that a matter of major social importance may not be decided in the political arena. This point is not important in Dahl’s theoretical analysis, since one can easily enough substitute “matter of major social importance” for “key political decision.” In his empirical work, however, Dahl seems to me to make precisely the illegitimate assumption I sought to avoid. Both in Who Governs? and in “The Concept of Power,” he simply takes it for granted that the important decisions are all made within the political sphere; what is even more questionable, he assumes without argument that the key political issues are to be found among those matters which have actually been decided by someone. This permits Dahl to rule out in advance, without consideration, all questions about why certain matters of major social importance failed to become objects of decision at all.

Within the sphere of key political decisions, Dahl argues that the concept of power can be given operational meaning only if there are disagreements over the issues. To say that a group has power with regard to an issue is to say that its preference prevails over the conflicting preferences of others. If there is some group of individuals whose preferences “regularly prevail in . . . all cases of disagreement over key political issues,” then we may speak of that group as a controlling group (though not quite as a power elite, as we shall see). The point is that if no differences in preference are ever manifested in the society over matters of major social importance, or alternatively, if the only “conflict” is between preference on the one hand and indifference on the other, then there is no empirical method for getting evidence of the exercise of power. In effect, Dahl is arguing that our earlier definition of a “power elite” is wrong. A
power elite is not merely a group of persons who together decide the matters of major importance which are objects of anyone’s decision at all. Such a group might properly be called a decisionary group, but not a power elite. In order to qualify as a power elite, a group must regularly prevail in the making and enforcing of such decisions and, with regard to matters of major social importance. And if our concepts are to be truly operational, we must present evidence of the existence of opposition to the prevailing group. It is not enough to assume that those who decide in ways we dislike must have done so in the face of significant opposition.

Dahl now advances one further qualification before offering his definition of a power elite. Since this qualification, in a suitably revised and expanded form, will play a central role in my argument, I shall quote Dahl’s statement at length:

In a full-fledged democracy acting strictly according to majority rule, the majority would constitute a controlling group, even though the individual members of the majority might change from one issue to the next. But since our model is to represent a ruling elite system, we require that these be less than a majority. However, in any representative system with single member voting districts where more than two candidates receive votes, a candidate could win with less than a majority of the votes; and it is possible, therefore, to imagine a truly sovereign legislature elected under the strictest “democratic” rules that was nonetheless governed by a legislative majority representing the first preferences of a minority of voters. Yet I do not think we would want to call such a system a ruling elite system. Because of this kind of difficulty, I propose that we exclude from our definition of a ruling elite any controlling group that is a product of rules that are actually followed (that is, “real” rules) under which a majority of individuals could dominate if they took certain actions permissible under the “real” rules. In short, to constitute a ruling elite a controlling group must not be a pure artifact of democratic rules.*

I suspect that many radical proponents of the power elite thesis would react with impatience to this sort of qualification. Of course we aren’t talking about some duly elected government; they would protest. Anyone who has lived in the United States in recent years knows perfectly well that there are some who rule and others who are ruled. These definitional maneuvers and refutations of straw-man theses cannot change the plain facts! So they might argue—but they would be wrong. Dahl’s clarifications are both legitimate and relevant; indeed, they need to be generalized and extended before the power elite thesis can be definitively evaluated.

There are a number of types of minority rule which clearly are not what social critics have in mind when they complain of the existence of a power elite. Dahl cites the case of rule by a democratically elected government which, under the rules of the system, represents a minority of the voters. The point, of course, is that in such a system, the majority could perfectly well rule if it chose to do so. The minority “rules” because there is sufficient division among the electorate to deny any party an absolute majority of votes. Consider now a somewhat different sort of case. Suppose that in a free, democratically organized society there was a man (or a group of men) whose grasp of the issues and political wisdom was widely believed to be superior to that of the general run of citizens. Suppose, indeed, that this man, by the force of his arguments and the elevation of his vision, regularly persuaded the electorate to support his preference. Imagine that he was returned to the office of

president term after term, and that he and his colleagues had virtually a free hand in the making and execution of public policy. Now, this situation might be very frustrating indeed to the small band who opposed his policies, believing his vision to be distorted and his arguments meretricious. In exasperation at their inability to dissuade their countrymen from following such a leader, they might grow extravagant in their condemnations, until they denounced him as dictator, and tyrant. They might feel bound in conscience to delay the government even to the extent of violent attempts at its overthrow. But surely it would be very odd indeed for them to accuse the ruler and his colleagues of being a power elite. If the authority of the rulers rests on the persuasiveness (not necessarily the truth) of their arguments, they can hardly be said to have corrupted their followers. One might as well accuse Einstein of tyranny for having so thoroughly converted physicists and mathematicians to the general theory of relativity.

Consider yet another case (which Dahl also briefly discusses). Suppose that a ruling group regularly wields power in free democratic elections with the support of very much less than a majority of the eligible voters, merely because most of the electorate is indifferent to the entire political process and fails to exercise its franchise. We may even suppose that there is considerable competition among elites for control of the government, but only within the framework of a broad consensus on fundamental questions of policy. Here again the unsuccessful opposition, on the fringes of the political system, may decry the lack of real debate and the stultifying continuity of wrongheaded policies from administration to administration. But so long as they have every opportunity to proselytize for votes among the great mass of the uncommitted, they can hardly blame their failure on a "power elite."

Let us distinguish two general sorts of opposition which a government may face. Constitutional opposition is any sort of opposition to the policies or to the tenure of the rulers which is permitted by the "real rules" of the system, as Dahl calls them. In the American political system, the fundamental power of constitutional opposition is the right periodically to vote the government out of office. The various powers of Congress to check the Administration and of the courts to check both come under the heading of constitutional opposition. So do such informal and undefined powers as the State Department's ability to transform the President's explicit directives for change into authorizations of operational immobility, or the ability of legislative assistants to shape the policy predilections of the Congressmen they serve. Violent opposition, by contrast, is opposition which breaks the real rules of the system. Insurrections, revolutions, military coups, assassinations are obvious examples of violent opposition to a ruling group.

The distinction's value lies in reminding us that a government may be invulnerable to one sort of opposition and yet exceedingly vulnerable to another. The President of the United States is probably as secure as any ruler in history against the threat of revolution or coup. Yet he is only moderately secure against assassination, and on noon of the Inauguration Day of his successor there is virtually nothing he can do to protect himself against a sudden and total loss of political power. By contrast, there are Latin American dictators who are invulnerable to constitutional challenge but in constant mortal danger of violent overthrow.

Let us attempt a new definition of the concept of a power elite, in the light of the qualifications and limitations that have just been advanced. A power elite, I suggest, should be
understood as a group of persons who together decide most of the matters of major social importance which are objects of anyone's decision at all, and who are capable of enforcing their decision against widespread opposition of either a violent or a constitutional nature. A well-entrenched dictator together with his administrative and military entourage is a power elite (but not the dictator alone, unless he is able to win out against an organized palace revolt). A duly elected President together with his Administration is not a power elite so long as it is possible to remove him from office by such ordinary means as not reflecting him.

This is a loaded definition, needless to say. By including the qualification that the ruling group must be able to enforce its decisions against widespread constitutional opposition, I appear to have begged the question whether America is controlled by a power elite. For not even C. Wright Mills denies that an organized majority of ordinary citizens could change the direction of our foreign and domestic policy virtually overnight, if it chose to act. With the exception of one possible argument, which will be considered shortly, there appears to be no ground for claiming that America is ruled by the sort of power elite which I have just defined. Why then should we adopt this definition?

In Talmudic fashion, let me answer a question with a question. Why did Mills write the book? Why have critics of American society seized upon the phrase, and why have those liberal political scientists whom Mills justly accused of a "celebration" of American politics so hotly rejected it? Mills did not intend the term as a morally neutral category of descriptive political science. One might as easily imagine an anthropologist classifying the marital customs of primitive tribes as "monogamous, adulterous, and promiscuous." The phrase "power elite" was an accusation flung at a smug and self-righteous America which prided itself.
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does not become a "power elite," with all that implies about the usurpation of power and the illegitimate exercise of authority, merely by making wrong—e.g., wicked—decisions. Only a romantic with an abiding faith in the goodness of The People will assume that when a society makes bad decisions, the fault must lie with an illegitimate and antidemocratic elite.

What is the present distribution of power in America? This is not the place to launch a full-scale investigation of such a question, and I certainly have no intention of bringing my discussion to a standstill while I laboriously canvass the vast literature that has grown up on the subject. Nevertheless, I think a few obvious things can be said which may permit us to arrive at a provisional conclusion on the power elite debate.

In the United States today, a relatively small group of men make virtually all the decisions concerning those matters of major social importance which are objects of decision at all. Most of them—the President and major Administration figures, the key Senators and Congressmen, the few influential Governors and Mayors, the senior military officials—are public employees whose power is directly derived from their official position. Some—the top echelons of the corporate world and their counterparts in the great foundations—derive such power as they have from their relatively brief tenure in the presidencies and chairmanships of their organizations. Only a very few are powerful in virtue of their personal wealth, and even they transform their money into power principally by buying the means for influencing elections.

But this group of powerful men, although it originates most of the major political decisions in American society, is remarkably vulnerable to large-scale popular opposition from the ranks of the "ordinary man," as Mills calls the rest of us. All the public officials among them, including those military

men who rise to positions of political power, are either elected by the people or else appointed by those who are elected. Hence a massive shift, right or left, in the distribution of voters along the political spectrum would be reflected almost immediately in a radical redirection of decision-making. The image we are encouraged by Mills to entertain is of a conspiratorial clique foisting its policies on a society which either actively opposes them or else is kept in such a state of ignorance and disorganization that its disapproval can never develop into effective opposition. But the facts are quite different, as even the most casual observer of the American scene can see. Radical candidates, for example, have run in countless elections around the United States. They receive a measure of publicity and exposure which is surely in excess of their proportionate share of the votes, although of course much below what is accorded the major party candidates. The elections are free and secret—not even the most disenfranchised radical critics claim otherwise. The result is that they rarely win more than two percent of the total vote! In Massachusetts, candidates have been known to do better than that merely by taking the name of Kennedy! It is natural to be discouraged, even bitter, in the face of such popular reaction. I have found that a stint in the Peace Movement is more likely to turn a man to Swift than to Marx. But it is surely wrong to explain the unresponsiveness of the American voter by invoking a power elite. The fact, of course, is that since this supposed elite is headed by men whose primary desire is to be elected, a large enough bloc of voters could turn them in almost any political direction.

The only segment of the group of powerful men whose power base is independent of the voters is the corporate directors. Their power derives from their control of the major corporations, which are not in turn responsible to
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the people. Now, some of the power of big business in the United States comes from its ability to affect the decisions of Congress and the Administration, through campaign contributions, influence in regulatory agencies, and so forth. But the important question for our purposes is whether business also exercises power outside the normal channels of government. Clearly, the great corporations regularly make decisions whose consequences are of the utmost social importance. These decisions, furthermore, are not subject to review by the general public, as are the decisions of elected or appointed officials. But although the unregulated decisions of big business have consequences of major social importance, those consequences themselves are rarely objects of decision. The reason for this is simply that capital in the United States is so fragmented into administratively autonomous corporations that such matters of major social importance as total yearly investment in heavy industry, new housing starts, economy-wide inventory levels, and so on, are not objects of anyone's decision at all. Some relatively unimportant efforts at collusion are undertaken by executives, particularly within single industries. But nothing like economic planning takes place in the United States, and hence no one can be said to exercise power over the corporate economy. (Private power, that is. The federal government makes a number of decisions about taxation, etc., which have some effect on the economy as a whole, but of course those decisions are subject to monitoring by the electorate.)

There is considerable difference between a power elite and an establishment. Both are groups of men who monopolize the making of decisions about matters of major social importance, but a power elite is capable of enforcing its decisions against considerable opposition of either a violent or a constitutional nature, whereas an establishment rules, as it were, by a mixture of persuasion, coercion, and apathy. The United States is ruled by an establishment which is, in the terms of William Kornhauser, "highly accessible." That is, the rulers are quite responsive to pressures from the ruled, and entrance into the elite is relatively open, although of course restricted in numbers. The truly powerful men in America are not, save by accident, the sons of powerful men, nor are they drawn from any single region or social class. Through their control over the procedures by which young men rise in the political, military, or corporate hierarchies, the men at the top exercise a considerable control over the character and policies of their successors. Nonetheless, they are virtually powerless to obstruct for long a policy which commands widespread notice, popular support.

To see that this is so, let us try to imagine what would happen in America today if there were suddenly to develop an enormous groundswell of vigorous support for a domestic policy of full-scale socialism and planned economy. We may suppose this policy to be violently opposed by virtually the entire establishment of politicians, generals, corporate executives, foundation presidents, university heads, and so forth, and yet supported by the people. The first evidence of the change in public opinion might be a weird set of answers to the usual Gallup or Harris polls. Initially, social scientists would issue complex explanations stressing the limitations of sampling as a technique of research, the finite probability of a skewed result, and so forth. Then a minor socialist candidate might win a state election. Immediately, the prospective candidates would appear, encouraged by this show in the wind. As socialist victories piled up, politicians would begin to reconsider their positions, and businessmen would hedge their bets by making small, private contributions to socialist campaign funds. By the next national election, a

sizable group of socialist representatives would sit in Congress. It could hardly take more than half a dozen years before a full socialist ticket swept to power and captured the presidency.

Is there anyone who really believes that “the establishment” would try to block this political transformation by such illegal means as voiding elections, refusing to relinquish office, calling out the troops to brutalize and intimidate voters? We shall probably never have a chance to find out, alas, but it seems evident to me that in the face of an aroused citizenry bent upon instituting even so un-American a policy as socialism, the established rulers of American society would be quite powerless. The fact is that Americans are ruled by default. No people in history has ever manacled itself so willingly, so knowledgeably, so docilely, in the chains of tyranny.

(The principal complaint of radical critics is not that the American political system is unresponsive to the wishes of the people, but that the policies of its rulers are wrong. That may indeed be true—I think it is—but it is hardly by itself evidence of the existence of a power elite.)

I remarked earlier that there was one possible argument in support of the thesis that America is controlled by a power elite. It is often claimed that the apparent power of the electorate has been nullified by the control of information and propaganda exercised by the elite. The voters have it within their power to determine the major political decisions, but, it is said, they are systematically misled, lied to, and indoctrinated through the mass media and in the schools. Public support is artificially generated for policies whose true purposes are never revealed. Those who rebel against this manipulated consensus either are coopted into the system with lucrative and prestigious jobs, or else are denied a hearing so that their protest is robbed of any real political significance.

Despite the popularity of this explanation of the passivity and acquiescence of the American electorate, it is in my opinion totally unsupported by the facts. Indeed, it is so manifestly implausible that its popularity with radicals requires an explanation, which I will try presently to provide. As proof of the falsity of the indoctrination theory, let us consider the issue which has dominated American politics for the past several years—Vietnam.

The official government justification of our Vietnamese policy has been regularly and explicitly refuted by news reports for almost two years now. The dictatorial character of the South Vietnamese military junta is displayed nightly in televised news broadcasts which reach tens of millions of American homes. Vivid images of the torturing of captives, the suppression of Buddhist groups, the burning of villages, are forced upon the American consciousness. News commentators repeatedly remind their audiences of the chasm between the predictions of our military advisers and the actual course of events. The hostile questioning of Administration witnesses by dissenting senators prompts revenue-producing afternoon and evening programs, so that Americans are virtually forced to acquaint themselves with the anti-government views of highly respected political figures. Those citizens whose political interest prompts them to even the slightest effort need only pick up the New York Times to read condemnations of the war as vigorous as any published in left-wing journals of protest. The bookstores are crowded with more dissenting literature on the subject than anyone could want to read.

How was the Johnson Administration able to persist for so long in its policies in the face of this dissenting propaganda? The answer is painfully clear: the anti-war forces
simply did not have the votes! So long as the United States was not obviously losing the war, and the costs were marginal to the economy and inflicted principally on the poor and politically silent segment of the population, the great mass of the American people were too stupid, or too vicious, to be very much concerned by the fact that their government was systematically murdering the inhabitants of Vietnam in order to support a petty dictatorship and maintain a military presence in Southeast Asia. As the costs of the war increased and the battle turned against us, the American people slowly moved from enthusiastic support to passive acquiescence to tentative opposition. In response to this shift, Johnson finally altered his policy and made the peace moves which had so long been urged. But the evidence of the Dominican Republic and elsewhere does very strongly suggest that if the murder had been continued at a sufficiently low cost, no significant segment of the American population could ever have been mobilized against it. Even the Germans, we may suppose, would have turned against the extermination of the Jews if they had realized how much precious war material was being diverted from the battle front to carry out that policy.

It is worth pointing out that Kennedy and Johnson were originally prompted to become involved in Vietnam precisely because they believed that such operations could be carried out inexpensively and effectively. Early in the Kennedy administration, Secretary McNamara rejected the Air Force first-strike nuclear policy and adopted instead the Army-Navy second-strike policy of relying on a nuclear deterrence umbrella beneath which the struggle for the so-called Third World could go on. The theory was that within the context of a nuclear stalemate, limited wars and paramilitary operations would carry little or no danger of a nuclear war. McNamara recognized that such limited operations would be political as well as military, and so he created the system of “counterinsurgency” forces which were to act as highly mobile, specialized, politically sophisticated units in revolutionary situations around the world. New weapons were invented to accompany these tactics, including the helicopters so much in evidence in Vietnam. The premise of this theory proved correct—

If the United States is not in the grip of a power elite, why do so many radical critics hate that theory? There are a number of reasons, including the natural inclination to relieve one’s frustrations by pinning the blame for failure on some identifiable villain. But the fundamental explanation, I think, is that the radical impulse feeds on a faith in the natural goodness of the people. If the state is permitted to act wickedly, it must be because the people are in chains. If there are no visible chains, then there must be invisible chains of ignorance or a habit of servitude. If the people are not tyrannized, it must be that they have been brainwashed. Otherwise they would exercise their power and dethrone the rulers. Now up to a point, there is a rationale for this faith. Insofar as the wicked policies of the rulers thwart the interests of the people (even, if you will, the true interests of the people), we may assume that natural human self-interest would lead the people to oppose those policies. If there is no overt opposition, we may reasonably infer that the people are denied the chance, or else that they are yet lacking a true understanding of the nature of their rulers. We may even be forced to conclude, as Rousseau did two centuries ago, that slavery long enough imposed can become a habit, and that real liberation requires more than the physical striking off of chains.
There may indeed be some truth in this argument, although the minds of Americans must be very feeble indeed if they can be manipulated and perverted by such mild and ineffectual propaganda as is served up in public schools and newspapers. But, at best, the argument only explains the orientation of American political thought. It explains, that is to say, why Americans should as a group lie so far to the right of Englishmen or Swedes in the political spectrum. What it does not show is that this fact can be traced to the deliberate choice of any identifiable group of rulers. The tone and bias of the public discourse in America is a consequence of countless deliberate decisions, no one of which comes close to determining the character of even a major segment of that discourse. The tone is one of those matters of major social importance which are not themselves objects of anyone’s decision. To see that this is so, one need simply contrast the American experience with that of a genuine totalitarian dictatorship in which the content of the mass media can be clearly traced to the explicit decisions of specifiable individuals.

What shall we say about the dispute between the radicals and the liberals? The radicals say that America is ruled by a power elite, and they are wrong. Those who rule in this country do so by default. They are completely vulnerable to popular opposition of even the most peaceful sort. But radicals are right to be outraged by the quality of America’s political life and by the direction of her domestic and foreign policies. They are frustrated by their failure to persuade the American people of even the simplest moral truths—that it is wrong to burn peasant huts in Asia on the pretext of protecting free elections in San Francisco; that the rights of investment capital do not take precedence over the rights of men; that the oppressed inhabitants of urban ghettos have as much right to burn the stores in which they have been
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... cheated as the revolutionary Bostonians had to jettison tea on which they would not pay an unjust tax. And in their frustration, radicals succumb to the temptation to blame the rulers rather than those who passively permit themselves to be ruled.

The liberals deny that America is ruled by a power elite, and they are right. But having won their little victory over the radicals, they then rejoice in the moral disaster of American politics, calling it stability, and moderation, and the end of ideology. They congratulate one another on the lack of moral passion in our political life, much like maiden school mistresses confusing a deficiency of libido with good manners. Their powers of social imagination are exhausted by the thought of extending to Negroes those inequalities and disadvantages already suffered by white Americans. But it makes no more sense to blame the chroniclers of our political apathy than the beneficiaries of it. The fault lies neither with liberal political scientists nor with the established order of decision makers, but simply with the American people.

America is not ruled by a power elite. But that is hardly the end of the matter. The most significant fact about the distribution of power in America is not who makes such decisions as are made, but rather how many matters of the greatest social importance are not objects of anyone's decision at all. It is universally agreed, for example, that the welfare of the nation depends upon a stable rate of economic growth, and yet virtually everyone is content to restrict the government to the most feeble sorts of indirect economic controls. Americans seem willing to allow their cities to decay into unintended slums despite the existence of more than enough theoretical understanding of the problem to permit rational and deliberate solutions to be initi-
In social theory, the criticism which produces this sort of qualitative advance is called "utopian." It consists in searching for ways to transform into new objects of social decision those matters of importance which are not within anyone's power at present. Each such discovery is a major advance for social rationality. (In Hegel's rather dramatic phrase, it carries men out of the realm of necessity and into the realm of freedom.) Naturally, proposals for transforming uncontrolled matters of importance into objects of decisions require new kinds of institutional organization, new ways of thinking, and—very possibly—new makers of decisions. Deeply entrenched habits of behavior may have to be uprooted, and inevitably some patterns of privilege are destroyed. Although it is impossible to reverse an advance in social control once it has been accomplished, there is no assurance that new advances will follow. As Robert Heilbroner points out in his recent book, *The Limits of Capitalism*, it is extremely likely that the present system of privilege and private ownership of capital will persist in the United States at least to the end of the century, which is about as far into the future as anyone can see. Despite the great and growing wealth of the American economy, the United States may see itself passed by socialist nations of East and West Europe, as it already sees itself left behind by some of them in such matters as the elimination of slums and the distribution of medical services. If it is true that some social needs, such as the reformation of our cities and the final elimination of poverty, cannot be served by even the most sophisticated maneuvers at the present level of social control, then we shall witness a progressively more frustrating failure of domestic liberalism to deal with the worsening social problems of American life. Rather like an old-time doctor who watches his pneumonia patient slip away despite his most skillful efforts, the welfare-state liberal will endlessly per-