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Robert McCluer Calhoun

Excerpt

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Prologue

Sparta, 432 B.C.

Irrational recklessness was now considered courageous commitment; hesitation while looking to the future was high-styled cowardice; moderation was a cover for a lack of manhood; and circumspection meant inaction while senseless rage now helped define the true man.

Thucydides

The recorded history of political moderation began in 432 B.C. As tensions mounted during the early stages of the Peloponnesian War, the Athenian leader, Pericles, and King Archidamus of Sparta each took the measure of his adversary and counterpart. They knew and respected each other, and both calculated that the other could be trusted to help keep the conflict within manageable limits. What they miscalculated was the bloodlust of Sparta's truculent allies and the intractability of Athenian commercial interests. A year further into the conflict, Pericles earned immortality for his eloquent, generous, and farsighted funeral oration honoring Athens' war dead. But Pericles was no moderate; he was a dedicated Athenian aristocrat, willing to give credit when credit was due but utterly unwilling to sacrifice any policy option.¹ As the conflict threatened to spiral out of control, it was Archidamus, the product of a martial culture but also the leader of society with its own civil constitution,² who recommended moderation. He reminded his allies that

Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War*, Steven Lattimore, trans. and ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1998), p. 169.

¹ Donald Kagan, *The Peloponnesian War* (New York: Viking, 2003), pp. 40, 47–54.

² Paul A. Rahe, *Republics Ancient and Modern*, vol. 1: *The Ancien Régime in Classical Greece* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994), pp. 150–152.

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some of you are of my own age, which means you will not let inexperience make you enthusiastic about this business. . . . Any of you making prudent calculations about the operations we are considering would find that it would not be on any limited scale. . . . Instead of taking up arms *yet*, send to them and make complaints, *not putting too much emphasis either on war or our willingness to accommodate* [emphasis added], and during this time prepare our own resources.

The Spartan ruler acknowledged that Athens was dedicated to the arts of peace, while Sparta was a warrior state. But although Athens might have an ethos of civic participation, Archidamus speculated, Sparta possessed, in its constitution, a disciplined, conscientious approach to life and death choices. "It is very possible that true prudence is *this quality* [this constitution or way of life] of ours. . . . Through our orderliness we are rendered both warlike and wise."³ In that compound phrase, "warlike and wise," lay the seed of the concept of political moderation.

We are warlike, Archidamus explained, because "a sense of respect" for adversaries and for reality itself "is the greater part of moderation, and courage the greater part of respect." And Spartans were "wise" because they were not all that well-educated and therefore could ill-afford to be cavalier in dismissing inconvenient facts. "Let us never abandon these practices" of "prudence and moderation . . . that our fathers have handed down to us. . . . Let us not be hurried into deciding in the brief space of a day about many lives, possessions, cities, and reputations. Let us decide calmly."

The reference to "our fathers" was telling: it associated moderation with oral tradition and with trust. Because tradition could be fragile and trust elusive, all of this availed Archidamus nothing; Sparta's allies were not prepared to listen to a discourse about moderation, and without their cooperation, his peace plan was stillborn. Nor were Pericles's Athenian followers interested in exploring the Spartan ruler's overture. From 431 to 404 B.C., the Peloponnesian War decimated the Greek world.⁴

When Thucydides composed his *History* of the war, the word he attributed to Archidamus for "moderation" or "prudence" was *sophrosyne* (pronounced "so-FROS-sen-ee"), a word with at least three overlapping meanings. In the first place, *sophrosyne* was a layered term associating "moderation" with "a sense of shame." The foundation of military

³ Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War*, Steven Lattimore, trans. (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, [1998]), p. 41. Cf. Charles Norris Cochran, *Christianity and Classical Culture: A Study of Thought and Action from Augustus to Augustine* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2003, originally published by Oxford University Press, 1940), pp. 53–54.

⁴ Kagan, *Peloponnesian War*, pp. 485–490; Lattimore, ed., Thucydides, *Peloponnesian War*, pp. 168–171.

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discipline, *sophrosyne* implied, was “shame” or “fear of reproach.” Thus, what made “good soldiers” was their mortal fear of public “shame” and the “reproach” of their commanders and the populations for whom they fought. Second, *sophrosyne* was not just a compound word; it was a *particular kind* of compound word, signaling the presence of two competing conceptions – both of them true at the same time. Moderation and shame sound different, one a confident stance and the other a distressing outcome. But in *sophrosyne*, the two meanings were forever locked in enforced partnership. Similarly, “discipline” rooted in “shame,” and “valor” based on fear of “reproach,” represented different kinds of motivation,⁵ but, as integral features of *sophrosyne*, they constituted a creative, if also an excruciating, tension akin to the “warlike” and “wise” capabilities of a well-trained soldier. “If the more commercial Greek cities stood at one end of the ancient spectrum,” classical historian Paul Rahe observes, “Sparta stood at the other. Of all the Hellenic communities, she came the closest to giving absolute primacy to the common good. She did this by turning the city into a camp, the *pólis* into an army, and the citizen into a soldier.”⁶

Finally, there is another path to the etymology of “moderation”; the antonym of *sophrosyne* is *polypragmosyne* (pronounced “poly-prag-mo-SEE-nay”) or the manner of a “busybody.”⁷ In this sense, Greek moderation was the maturity and good sense to leave well enough alone. According to one modern editor, Thucydides distinguished between “real moderates,” who kept the horrors of war firmly lodged in their civic consciousness, and “moderate partisans” during the horrible latter stages of the Peloponnesian War, who fought with one eye on their duty, the other on their survival.⁸

Just as the United States and Britain in the 1940s and 1950s lived in the shadow of the Munich crisis and looked back on the appeasement of Hitler in the late 1930s as a political and moral disaster, so in the early fourth century B.C., educated Athenians learned from Thucydides that the failure to practice moderation during the Peloponnesian War had been a defining tragic event in their own recent history.⁹ Aristotle perpetuated the compound character of political moderation as a lesson of

⁵ Simon Hornblower, *A Commentary on Thucydides* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), vol. 1, p. 129.

⁶ Rahe, *Republics Ancient and Modern*, vol. 1, p. 125.

⁷ William Arrowsmith, ed., *Aristophanes: Three Comedies* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1961), p. 3.

⁸ Thucydides, *Peloponnesian War*, pp. 169–171.

⁹ Rahe, *Republics Ancient and Modern*, vol. 1, pp. xv–xviii, 193–194.

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recent history and as timeless ethical consideration. As he explained in Book Two of his *Nicomachean Ethics* (dedicated to his son, Nicomachus), “moral virtue is a mean between two vices, one involving excess [and] the other deficiency. . . . Its character is to aim at what is intermediate in passions and in actions.” Failure to cultivate moderate virtues, he warned, left men at sea amidst their passions; at the same time, the desperate embrace of any saving virtue could carry an individual to an opposite extreme.¹⁰

So difficult and important was this search that Aristotle translated the concept of middle ethical ground into a problem in mathematics and geometry – the classical disciplines most renowned for clarity and rigor. Viewed from that perspective, moderation defined the very nature of humanity itself as a striving to measure up to the highest potentiality in relation to variables of time and circumstance. Ethical political decisions were often a matter of timing, of measuring time in relation to appropriate actions and choices. The Greek rhetorician Protagoras called “man the measure” of all things, meaning that there are no moral standards external to humans being themselves. Drawing from Euclid, Aristotle posited that the best political choices lay among a range of possible options in an ethical triangulation from the point of view of the individual somewhere in the middle between extremes of barbarism (natural man) and moral zealotry (sophistication or expertise carried to a putrified extreme). The least of two evils, Aristotle concluded, lay somewhere in the middle of an ethical arc as viewed by man looking outward from the center of a knowable world; “hence . . . it is no easy task to find the middle.”¹¹

¹⁰ J. L. Ackrill, *Aristotle's Ethics* (New York: Humanities Press, 1973), pp. 73–74.

¹¹ J. L. Ackrill, trans. and ed., *Aristotle's Ethics* (New York: Humanities Press, 1973), p. 73. On Aristotle's politics, see C.C.W. Taylor, “Politics,” in Jonathan Barnes, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Aristotle* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 234–235: “Most of the virtues of character, in whose performance the excellent life consists, require interaction with other, e.g., generosity and justice,” a quintessential moderate formulation. Aristotle's use of Euclid is discussed in John J. Young, “On Reading Aristotle's *Ethics*,” unpublished paper. See also D. S. Hutchinson, “Ethics,” *Cambridge Companion to Aristotle*, pp. 217–232, and Louise Campbell, “A Diagnosis of Religious Moderation: Matthew Parker and the 1559 Settlement,” in Luc Racaut and Alec Ryrie, eds., *Moderate Voices in the European Reformation* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2005), p. 36: “Aristotle implied the mean was equal to the amount which was appropriate for the circumstances, not necessarily therefore, a point midway between two extremes.”

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Political Moderation

An Introduction

Who – moderating melody with different sounds and voices yet most satisfying to sensitive ears – heals sickness, has mingled cold with heat and moisture with dryness, the rough with the smooth, sweetness with pain, shadows with light, quiet with motion, tribulation with prosperity. This greatest harmony of the universe, though discordant, contains our safety.

Jean Bodin, 1576

Political moderation has been, and remains, misunderstood. “Moderation is not an halting betwixt two opinions, . . . nor is it lukewarmness,” Thomas Fuller declared on the eve of the English Civil War. “But it is a mixture of charity and discretion in ones judgment.”¹ Charity was a religious duty and principle, discretion a prudential option, and moderation allowed both to co-exist as an ethical insight. Those elements were the heart of the matter. Political moderation consisted of these ordinary materials – inherited beliefs or *principles*; natural caution, self-protectiveness, or *prudence*; and an ethical compass in matters of governance and citizenship. In our own time, moderation rebukes corrosive partisanship from the right or the left, but because, as Fuller observed,

Luc Mark Greenglass, “Conclusion. Moderate Voices, Mixed Messages,” in *Moderate Voices in the European Reformation*, Luc Recaut and Alec Ryrie, eds. (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2005), p. 210.

¹ Thomas Fuller, “Of Moderation,” in *The Holy State and the Profane State* [1642], Maximilian Graff Walten, ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1938), p. 205. Samuel Johnson, *Dictionary of the English Language* (1786), defines moderation as “forebearance of extremity; the contradictory temper to party violence; a state of keeping a due mean betwixt extremes.” Jürgen Diethe, “*The Moderate*: Politics and Allegiances of a Revolutionary Newspaper,” *History of Political Thought* 4 (1983): 247–279.

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“moderate men are commonly crushed betwixt the extreme parties on both sides,”² moderation historically has been, and in some respects remains, a risky, hazardous commitment to mediation of intractable political disputes or to ongoing conciliation of persistent social conflicts. Because almost every sane person is in *some* respects a moderate (habitually preferring the company of a respectable constituency of allies to the solitary advocacy of bizarre opinions), political moderates will be defined in these pages as *persons who intentionally undertake civic action, at significant risk or cost, to mediate conflicts, conciliate antagonisms, or find middle ground*. Political moderation has been, moreover, a human phenomenon: *the clear-eyed recognition and willing acceptance of paradox in the discussion and exercise of power*. Except for saints and zealots, no one mediated, conciliated, or reached across political divides all of the time. Those who did were radicals. Moderation has been, rather, a phenomenon of the moment, and moderates have spent time and effort considering and choosing – or allowing themselves to be caught up in – moments of political peacemaking.³

From the early modern period until well into the twentieth century, political moderation has encouraged men and women in responsible positions of power to look to Renaissance statecraft for historic guidance. At the same time the history of political moderation has embraced more than government, law, and democratic institutions. Moderation has also curbed and channeled political discourse and consciousness throughout *civil society*.⁴ The history of political moderation did not arise just from politics per se but also from political dimensions of family, community, and religious life.

The favored son of America's first great political family, John Quincy Adams, understood the cost of political moderation, and he grappled with the moderate paradox of being simultaneously principled and prudent as a holder of political trust. On January 27, 1804, President Thomas Jefferson, Vice President Aaron Burr, and Senator John Quincy Adams, a Federalist from Massachusetts, attended a party at Stelle's Hotel in Washington, D.C., to celebrate the ratification of the Louisiana Purchase. In this gathering of Republican Party notables, Adams felt distinctly out of place, and when

² Fuller, *The Holy State and the Profane State*, p. 238.

³ The earliest and most cogent explication of moderation as a “dialectical passage” toward middle ground is David C. Harlan, “The Travail of Religious Moderation: Jonathan Dickinson and the Great Awakening,” *Journal of Presbyterian History* 61 (1983): 411–426.

⁴ Marvin B. Becker, *The Emergence of Civil Society in the Eighteenth Century* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), pp. 74–87.

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someone toasted the proposition, “To the tempestuous Sea of Liberty, may it never be calm!” Adams declined to raise his glass.⁵

His very visible gesture was an act of intellectual courage. A discriminating supporter of administration foreign policy who believed that politics should stop at the water's edge, the son of the second President committed political suicide in 1807 by endorsing Jefferson's hated embargo. Facing certain defeat for reelection to the Senate, he resigned his office in 1808, completing his estrangement from the Federalist Party. President James Madison appointed him Minister to Russia in 1809, chief negotiator of the Treaty of Ghent in 1814, and Minister to Great Britain from 1815 to 1817 – a brilliant foreign policy career culminating in eight years as Secretary of State under James Monroe and elevation to the presidency in the disputed election of 1824–1825. Gifted and ambitious, John Quincy Adams was not an opportunist, certainly not a turncoat. He moved from moderate Federalism to moderate Republicanism during the first decade of the nineteenth century for reasons of principle and patriotism. Why and how?

- Why have American men and women gravitated from partisan peripheries toward the moral center of political life?
- How did moderates create new attachments with others who traveled different routes away from partisanship?
- How did they negotiate between their interests and convictions?
- What prices did they pay and what gratifications did they gain?

This book offers answers to those questions. Chapter 1 locates the beginnings of American political moderation in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century trans-Atlantic dissemination of British and European moderation throughout the Atlantic world – an epoch during which British moderates apprehensively equated Augustan power and prosperity with the Roman transition from republican to imperial rule. Chapter 2 examines the role of political moderates during the era of the American Revolution and charts the ways in which successive stages of resistance, rebellion, warfare, and Christian republicanism moderated, while in the process of creating, a stable constitutional republic. Chapter 3 then chronicles the formation of politically moderate regions in the Southern backcountry and the Middle West. Finally, Chapter 4 demonstrates the ways in which denominational Christianity (institutional and efficient) and primitive Christianity (spontaneous and situational) moderated, of all things, moderation itself. Illustrating these

⁵ Marie B. Hecht, *John Quincy Adams* (New York: Macmillan, 1972), p. 152.

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processes are two detailed case studies of religiously grounded political moderation from the 1850s, one from Due West, South Carolina, and the other from the Vine Street neighborhood in Nashville, Tennessee. Those episodes are the climax not only of the chapter but the entire book – documenting conclusively the moderating effects of denominational-primitive competition as agencies of order and civility in politics and society. Four Conclusions draw the elements of the book together and echo questions posed first in the Introduction. The Prologue on the birth of political moderation in ancient Sparta reveals the subtlety and complexity of the earliest language about moderation, and the Epilogue pinpoints the rise and influence of moderate liberalism in the mid-nineteenth century.

The historical record of political moderation underscores a major finding: *while the substantial core of political moderation expressed itself as political philosophy at the core of civil society, at the outer edge of moderation, where it blended into political culture, moderation intermingled with religion.*⁶ Epigraphs by Harvey Mansfield, Jr., and Reinhold Niebuhr, at the opening of this book, plot its coordinates. Mansfield is a moderate conservative political philosopher, Niebuhr was a moderate liberal religious ethicist. Written and spoken as World War II erupted, Niebuhr's words about freedom, love, and the limitations of the "gregarious impulse" groped toward an understanding of religiously grounded moderation; as the Cold War ended, Mansfield spoke of moderates as "volunteers" in a society arbitrarily polarized between liberal choice and conservative duty. In war and peace, in political disagreement and consensus, the narrative of moderation history explores unfolding and reshaping human dilemmas.

The history of political thought indicates two contrasting and also complementary ways of approaching political moderation. Informed by political philosophy, the first approach goes to the *central core* of moderation as a tradition and deals with jurisprudence. This book takes a different tack by locating the *peripheral outer edges* of moderation, where it made contact with political culture and where religion and ethics disseminated moderation into the civil order. In 1989, as I sought to redirect my then still rudimentary investigation into early American religion and politics, legal historian Christian G. Fritz initiated a philosophical and jurisprudential study of the search for

⁶ For the evolution of this idea, see Robert M. Calhoun, "Cusp of Spring," in *Autobiographical Reflections on Southern Religious History*, John B. Boles, ed. (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2001), pp. 53–72.

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constitutional “middle ground” in the six decades following American independence.⁷ Neither Fritz nor I ever became aware of each other's projects, yet it was no coincidence that, eighteen years later, both our book manuscripts found their way to Lewis Bateman's desk at Cambridge University Press in New York.

DEFINITIONS

Political moderation invites appreciative description, and sometimes casual dismissal, but resists rigorous definition. Moderation may have been a moral and social virtue and a synonym for political reasonableness, but the concept of *historic political moderation* is not an ideal typology. Viewed in the context of the turbulent, complex political and intellectual history of the early modern Western world, political moderation can be defined, somewhat ambiguously, in five different ways:

1. *Political moderation was an ideology in the making which failed to coalesce.* After Thucydides discovered moderation and Aristotle enshrined it in his *Ethics* (see above), St. Augustine made moderation one of the marks of the beloved community. There it remained ensconced within the protective layering of Christian doctrine for more than a thousand years. Then in the two years following the 1572 St. Bartholomew Day massacre of Huguenot leaders in France, the Renaissance humanist Michel de Montaigne (1533–1592) and the Huguenot theorist François Hotman (1524–1590) resurrected political moderation as an autonomous concept.⁸ During the turbulent century that followed, four successive generations of moderate political thinkers challenged threatening religious and political polarization by planting moderate remedies directly in between extreme immoderate poles: *conciliation* (during the 1570s and '80s); *custom* (1590s

⁷ Christian G. Fritz, *American Sovereigns: The People and America's Constitutional Tradition before the Civil War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

⁸ “Of Moderation,” John Florio, trans., in *The Essays of Montaigne* (New York: Modern Library, n.d.), pp. 156–160. In David Quint, *Montaigne and the Quality of Mercy: Ethical and Political Themes in the Essais* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), ch. 4, “An Ethics of Yielding,” opens with Montaigne's judgment that ethical moderation cannot be a matter of choice but instead must be a societal imperative: “Humility and submission alone can make a good man; it should be prescribed to him, not left to the choice of his reason,” p. 102. Montaigne wrote against the background of religious civil war, which, he feared, had the potential of extirpating all humane values. Quentin Skinner, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought*, vol. 2: *The Renaissance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), pp. 234, 269, 278–280, 299, 305, 310, 322, 324.

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to the 1620s); *mediation* (1630s and '40s); and *love* (1630s to '80s), a four-stage efflorescence of moderate political thought.⁹

Had the epic seventeenth-century struggles between constitutionalism and absolutism not eased after 1688 and 1713, ideological moderation might well have matured and hardened during the eighteenth century. Instead, eighteenth-century moderation fragmented into a series of still pertinent, attractive qualities of temperament, ethical sensitivity, and political sagacity floating free amid the Atlantic world diasporas after ideological pressures had abated and demographic movement expanded.¹⁰

2. *Moderation was a refuge for those wounded by political polarization in early modern Europe.* Moderation may have met the need Huguenots felt in the immediate aftermath of St. Bartholomew's Day for a more resilient, tough-minded political credo. Historians have looked at the political genius of the French Wars of Religion in two different ways. One was Aristotelian (midway between extremes), the other humanist (in the cultural center assailed on all sides). The Aristotelian climax of the struggle in France for political peace, according to Quentin Skinner, was an ideology "capable of defending the lawfulness of resisting [royal authority] on grounds of conscience," while at the same time "they needed to broaden the basis of their support" by embracing "a constitutionalist and less purely sectarian ideology of opposition" in François Hotman's advocacy of a constitutional monarchy. France did not get a constitutional monarchy but did acquire a Gallican tradition of kingship in which the king ruled above the fray of religious parties that accorded with the humanist moderation of Montaigne, who preferred education to ideological positioning.¹¹ Taking a stand on middle ground between two extremes was neither comfortable nor reassuring, while education was tidal, rising, falling, rising again.

Moderates were thus made by ideological and cultural circumstances they imperfectly understood, and when circumstances changed they often drifted back into older habits. A lifelong moderate – a conscientious Quaker, for example – was in reality a radical. Moderation was a response

⁹ See Robert M. Calhoon, "On Political Moderation," *Journal of the Historical Society* 6 (2006): 276–285.

¹⁰ Ideological moderation dissolved at the same time that British imperialism changed from an ideology to an identity; see David Armitage, *The Ideological Origins of the British Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 188–198.

¹¹ Dale K. Van Kley, *The Religious Origins of the French Revolution: From Calvin to the Civil Constitution, 1560–1791* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), pp. 32–38.