

Paul H.
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The Public Discourse



Play Theory

What we say to one another is a serious business: ideas have consequences. A good idea can bring forth all sorts of blessings; a bad one can make life miserable. One man's confused brainstorm today, if unexposed and unchecked, will become everybody's grotesque reality tomorrow. Given the penalties that attach to this reasoning, one might expect that public discussion would resemble the wise, benign seminars of geniuses and angels. In fact, it is more often just the opposite, and experience teaches us that we must keep a vigilant and critical eye on the public discourse simply to avoid disasters.

Why is this so? Well, some parts of the answer are clear enough. People have a seemingly endless capacity to make honest mistakes. Bad ideas are harder to recognize than we might wish. Then, too, certain people acquire an interest in the perpetuation of bad ideas because they can make a living from them, and this accounts for much of the nonsense perpetrated by politicians, advertisers, and other such publicizing persons. Yet, more important than why nonsense exists is the question: why do we take it? And not merely take it, enjoy it? Our infirmities can account for a lot of what we do — but clearly not for all. People, after all, are not total dummies, and total dummies are what we would have to be to swallow the most flagrant nonsense of our editorialists, columnists, professors, and politicians. We need to find the missing link in our explanation.

Several years ago, a psychologist by the name of William Stephenson published a fascinating book called *The Play Theory of Mass Communication*. Its thesis was that people derive pleasure, not only from the *content* of communication, but also from the simple *act* of communication. We read, for instance, not only because we want to know what's going on, but also because we enjoy exercising the skills of reading. Thus, one reason we take and enjoy nonsense is that we often don't care whether what we are reading makes sense or not — so long as we are in fact reading it and enjoying the pleasures of reading *per se*. Indeed, we do not even care whether what we read has any content whatsoever.

Now I could go on at some length explaining Stephenson's subtle and elegant thesis—but I am not so sure that I am willing to count on your reading-pleasure alone to carry you through to the end of this column. So I propose to offer you instead an inspired piece of writing that is utterly without "con-

tent" and yet is still capable of arousing emotion and reader interest. The first time you read it, it will seem rather strange. The second time through, you will be amused. The third time you read it—and it bears even a third reading—you will see how acute Stephenson's theory is, and how completely one can become engrossed into a reading that says literally nothing. The article was written by Tom Johnson and was published in *The Village Voice* on June 1, 1972. Entitled "An Inside View of Bangkok," it is in its entirety that which follows:

I should admit at the outset that the title of this article is a lie. Not that it isn't a good idea. I suppose if I had been to Bangkok and felt that I had some kind of inside view, I might write an article on that subject. But since that is not the case, it would be presumptuous for me to do so. Perhaps it was wrong to select such a title in the first place. Yet an article does require a title, and it is impossible to devise a title for an article of this nature which will not be misleading in one way or another. You will understand what I mean if you continue reading for a while. Or perhaps you will not wish to read further now that you have been told that the article is not about Bangkok. But I am sure you have other interests aside from Bangkok. So perhaps you will continue reading, if only to find out what the article really is about.

Some readers will already have turned the pages to something else, but most will no doubt read on into this second paragraph despite the disconcerting nature of the first one. Some will be reading faster and more skeptically now than when they began. A few will be reading more slowly and with increased interest. Most will be proceeding on the assumption that the writer has simply chosen a very indirect way of introducing his subject, and that the article will soon begin to present concrete ideas of some sort or another. A few will already be suspicious that the article is going to continue in much the same way it began. Of course, the latter are correct. Though there are still many paragraphs remaining, they are all written in more or less similar style, and none of them deal with any subject in the usual sense. So readers who are only interested in reading *about* something would be well advised to turn to something else at this point. Those who continue reading should do so without any great anticipation of something to come. If they read expecting the

article to make some point, they will only be disappointed when they discover that it does not lead up to anything in particular. But many articles which claim to be informing the reader are equally uninformative. And the idea that people read in order to gain information is largely an illusion anyway, since most of the time when people read they are not gaining information so much as simply exercising a skill they have learned.

While I am not concerned with informing or entertaining readers in the usual way, I do not wish to disappoint anyone. Thus I feel obliged to warn the reader not to anticipate anything. I realize it is difficult to read without anticipating, but readers who can manage to do so will find the article much more enjoyable than readers who can not. Meanwhile, I shall do my best to try to help everyone read the article with a minimum of boredom and disappointment. Perhaps the best advice I can provide at this point is that you skip the following paragraph, which is probably the least interesting one in the article. Of course, you may read it if you like, and I imagine most readers who have ventured this far into the article will not be able to overlook it completely.

If, despite advice to the contrary, you find yourself reading this paragraph, you should at least not read every word. If you do insist on reading every word, I can not accept any responsibility in the event that you become bored. And you probably will become bored by the redundancy and the lack of content. So please skim over the sentences so as not to waste any more time on them than necessary. If you are still reading every word, you will no doubt be quite disappointed by the time you conclude the paragraph and discover that it really does not say anything. You will become bored with the redundancy and the lack of content. If, despite advice to the contrary, you still find yourself reading this paragraph, you should at least try not to read every word. You will become bored by the redundancy and the lack of content. So please skim over the sentences so as not to waste any more time on them than necessary. If you do insist on reading every word, I can not accept any responsibility in the event that you become bored.

Even though this article does not pertain to Bangkok, it seems only right that I should refer again to "An Inside View of Bangkok," and thus make some attempt to relate article with title.

If the reader did not know quite what to think when I warned him initially not to anticipate anything from this article, he will now have a better understanding of what I meant. The article began with a discussion of its erroneous title, proceeded with a few remarks about how readers would react to the article and some warnings about what to expect. It then led into an unnecessary paragraph which the reader was asked to skim, followed by an unnecessary reference to the title and an unnecessary recapitulation of all these things. In all, it has been quite uninformative.

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Charles S. Hyneman

State and Local Authority vs. Federal Domination

I believe that the question of where to put the power to govern this nation is of great importance and calls for a most serious re-examination right now. I have been asking questions about it, reading about it, and thinking about it for some time and I shall tell you as simply as I can what I think we are up against and what are some alternatives available to us.

But first, you should know something about the presumptions which guide my thought and the prejudices which may limit what I see and shape my conclusions.

One: I am 100 percent committed to popular self-government. I believe that elected officials ought to be firmly in charge of all important business of government in which there are significantly different judgments as to what ought to be the main lines of public policy. This does not mean that I think judges of the U.S. Supreme Court and superintendents of Army Hospitals ought to be elected, but it does mean that I think we now let administrative bureaucracies fix a lot of policies that ought to be debated and voted on in Congress.

Two: I am a strong believer in variety, in a diversity of policies and opportunities that provide for you to go your way and me to go my way. This means that I want to preserve the autonomy of businessmen and business firms and encourage free association in social organizations, and so insist that there must be mighty good reason for propelling government into some new area of American life. It means also that I think all government business that can be handled satisfactorily in the state house, city hall, or county courthouse ought to be put there and kept out of Washington.

Three: I think the national government now has more business than the elected officials (Congress and president) can adequately look into and look after, and I have no doubt that they will succumb to public demands that result in their taking on additional burdens. Unless the

American mind takes a turn which I do not foresee, this assumption of new business will not be balanced by returning an equal amount of old business back to the private sector. Government in the United States is destined to reach further and further into our lives, unless I am a much worse prophet now than I have been in the past.

So we have come to the first question that I want to ask you and express a few opinions of my own about. What can we do to make sure that the persisting and enlarging volume of public business is attended to intelligently, with minimum costs and maximum gains to the American people? It seems to me that our present answer, a policy of continuously delegating power to national bureaucracies, is unacceptable. We have more administrative organizations now than Congress or the president can effectively oversee. Several of them are too big to be manageable even if Congress and the president did try to subject them to strict control. And finally, in my opinion, we are embracing a poor instrument for attaining the answerability to the people which the Founding Fathers had in mind — when we lodge a wide range of choices to fix public policy in officials whose names and reputations for prior achievements are unknown to the people they govern.

So I approach this question with two conclusions and a prophesy. A conclusion of principle — that elected officials ought to be firmly in charge of the government; a conclusion of fact — that the men and women we put in charge of the national government are not now maintaining that measure of direction and control; and a prediction — that this unacceptable condition is bound to get worse unless we reverse a long-developing trend.

What can be done, either to improve the ability of Congress and president to do well what they undertake, or to relieve them — more responsibly — of lesser business that hinders their addressing matters that ought to have first priority? Three possible alternative

courses of action must be considered. Stated as questions they are: 1. Can we make the White House and Congress more efficient? 2. Can the congressmen allocate the public business among themselves in some way so that no congressman has to divide his attention among as many things as he does now? 3. Can we raise our state and local officials to a new level of importance by handing over to them sectors of public policy which up to now we have been entrusting to administrative departments of the national government?

I see little promise indeed in the first course of action — increased efficiency. As for greater efficiency in the White House, I think we can dismiss that from our minds altogether. The White House is one of our most revered national monuments. It must be visited by a few hundred thousand persons each year, and I suspect that a full third of the persons who go there are experts from the Bureau of the Budget who are trying to show the president how to use his staff more efficiently.

The Budget Bureau's experts stay away from Congress and no doubt a great deal more inefficiency abounds at that pole of the political planet. Congress took a magnificent step to improve the conduct of its affairs by restructuring committees and making better provision for research aids in 1946, and many congressmen think the time is ripe for another overhaul. But improvements of this order, desirable as they are, offer little promise, in my opinion, of freeing Congress for sufficient time to apply their wisdom to public policies. Far more would be gained if we could capture for more important uses the countless hours of time that congressmen give to constituents who insist on bringing little problems to the mightiest official to whom they have access. I am conservative in estimating promise of improvements in that sector, however, for I am one of those who believe that it is a good thing for a congressman to look a constituent in the face pretty often and be reminded that he was elected to serve