

On Political Books

The Courtier's Art

Flattery through the ages

By David Ignatius

MORE THAN A DECADE AGO, I SENT A LETTER to a college classmate and fellow journalist whom I'll call "K." I had not seen him in a while, and in the interim he had become a powerful figure in the media, and it worried me slightly that we had never quite clicked as friends. I don't recall precisely what I wrote, except that it offered generous praise—fulsome praise, even—for one of his acerbic columns in *The Washington Post*.

Not long after that, "K" wrote a column about flattery. He noted the delicious pleasure he took in receiving insincere letters of praise from people who wanted to curry his favor. His theme was that insincere praise is really the best kind of all—because it shows how desperately someone wants to ingratiate himself. "After all," he wrote, "what do I care what this philistine oaf actually thinks about my article? On the other hand, there is a genuine if unintended compliment in the fact that he troubled to write—and the less he meant what he said, the greater the compliment." It was many years before I wrote another letter to "K."

But perhaps I flatter myself. Perhaps it was some other toadying letter that prompted "K's" acid response. Perhaps I have only imagined all these years that my insincerity rose to a level of obsequiousness that prompted his retort. Perhaps mine was only ordinary insincerity, and he had some entirely different fawning letter-writer in mind.

These are the sort of bilious thoughts that emerge from reading Richard Stengel's history of flattery. *You're Too Kind* is a learned and lucid examination of ass-kissing over the ages, and it will be a rare modern reader who does not at some point cringe with self-recognition. Even "K," I suspect, will see himself in this catalogue of

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courtiers and connivers. For as Stengel makes clear, flattery is the coin of our realm. And the most interesting form of ingratiation is one that will be familiar to *Washington Monthly* readers—who by definition are smart enough to see through the simpler forms of brown nosing and fawning praise—and must therefore play the Master Game, where flattery is coated in irony and cynicism. In the clever, meritocratic world we inhabit, as Stengel says, "You don't see ... fastball-over-the-center-of-the-plate flattery, but a slider that just nicks the corner."

Do I flatter you, dear reader? I hope so.

What's eerie about this book is the universality of flattery. Stengel chronicles its persistence through all of recorded human history—from the ancient Egyptians to the Greeks, from the courts of medieval Europe to the corridors of Washington lobbyists. One would be tempted to say that man is the animal that flatters—except that Stengel shows that chimpanzees outdo humans in the ass-kissing department, taking the matter all too literally.

One of the most intriguing sections of the book, in fact, is Stengel's discussion of how chimpanzees curry favor through the ritual behavior of grooming. The fawning ritual begins with the subordinate chimp greeting the dominant "alpha" male. Stengel explains: "Sometimes the greeter kisses the feet of the alpha male and brings along objects, like a leaf or stick, as a kind of offering Females, instead of greeting the alpha male, present their backsides to be inspected and sniffed. Sometimes the alpha male will permit subordinates to fondle his scrotum, which is considered a form of reassurance for both the dominant chimp and the subordinate one."

"Their behavior should seem disconcertingly familiar," Stengel notes tartly. "Unlike us, however, chimps don't have the ability to weave the elaborate explanations that we use to justify our more craven conduct."

In the animal world, as in ours, deception has the

**YOU'RE TOO KIND:
A Brief History of
Flattery**

By Richard Stengel
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essential purpose of enhancing the deceiver's chances of survival. "Nature doesn't care about truth," writes Stengel. He notes that harmless snakes mimic the bright colors of poisonous ones, so as better to survive; similarly, butterflies that might be eaten by predatory birds mimic the colors of the foul-tasting butterflies the birds ignore. Most species have a version of what anthropologists call the "pecking order," in which weak animals pay court to strong ones. They fawn, flatter, falsify—whatever will help them survive and pass on their genes.

Stengel has assembled a rich catalogue of flattery over time. Nearly every society, it seems, prepared some sort of handbook for flatterers. The ancient Egyptian writer Ptahhotep, for example, offered a compendium of advice about how to ingratiate yourself with the Pharaoh, including this memorable admonition: "Laugh after he laughs, and it will be very pleasing to his heart." That one has always worked well for me, I must say. In ancient Egypt, by Stengel's account, flattering the Pharaoh was the organizing principle of government. The ultimate reward for the flatterer was to be buried near the Great One's tomb, and thereby gain the chance to flatter him for eternity.

Stengel is interesting on the question of whether God likes to be flattered. He offers a pointed reading of the Old Testament to show that the God of the Hebrews was indeed desperate for praise. "Strange to say," he writes, "but Yahweh is a rather insecure fellow." He's peevish, demanding, irrational. He specifies in elaborate detail the kinds of offerings and sacrifices He requires. He punishes poor souls like Job just to show that He can do it. Job's problem, Stengel comments, was that he was "the Unflatterer." He was a loyal employee, a guy with a "Kick Me" sign on his butt who thought he didn't have to make nice with the Almighty. So God put him through Hell.

Stengel gives this frank assessment of God's vanity, as described in the Old Testament: He doesn't even pretend to be fair; "He's a God who plays favorites ... He's also very, very touchy In His dialogue with Moses, God sounds positively Nixonian. His conversation could have come from the Watergate tapes. 'How long will this people despise me? And how long will they not believe in me, in spite of all the signs which I have wrought among them? I will strike them with the pestilence and disinherit them.'" Stengel's explanation: "There's a reason God is insecure; He's the projection of an insecure people." Perhaps, he notes, "the covenant went to the Israelites' heads. They began to flatter themselves that they were special."

The Greeks regarded flattery as poisonous—an insidious political dishonesty that posed the ultimate

threat to democracy. The cure for this poison was *parbesia*, or frankness, in which a person shared unpleasant truths with his fellow citizens. Stengel quotes the Greek philosopher Isocrates: "Such frankness is a virtue in a counselor, who must risk the ire of princes foolish enough to be offended when contradicted." The Romans were more worldly and corrupt. Indeed, the spread of flattery might be listed among the causes for Rome's fall. It was pervasive enough that the Roman writer Plutarch penned an essay on the age-old theme, "How to Tell a Flatterer from a Friend," which included these gems, as summarized by Stengel:

• Change one's views and opinions abruptly and see if the flatterer will follow ...

• Be aware of whether the individual in question praises your actions or yourself; if he does the latter, he's probably a flatterer ...

• Make a request of a friend and he will say, 'Yes, if I can, it will be done.' Make the same request of a flatterer and he will reply, 'It is done.'"

The ritualized court life of medieval Europe lived on flattery, and it spawned many advice manuals. Machiavelli's *The Prince* was an upmarket example—he included a chapter on "How Flatterers Should be Avoided"—but Stengel prefers a crasser work called *The Courtier* by Castiglione, first printed in 1528. Castiglione's most valuable insight for the modern courtier was a concept he called *spezzatura*, which Stengel translates as "a sophisticated naturalness, a mastery that seems unstudied. What we sometimes call 'cool.'" That, as we know, is the very essence of successful flattery in our age—that hint of irony, that knowingness that makes the flattery seem oblique and unintended, and thus more seductive. It is, as Stengel says, "the art that conceals the art."

The Age of Reason brought a new precision to the analysis of insincerity. Montaigne was fascinated by the subject. Stengel notes his observation that "the beauty of truth is that it has one face," whereas deceit "has a hundred thousand forms, and a field indefinite, without bound or limit." On a less high-minded plane, Stengel cites Montaigne's quotation of Erasmus: "Every man likes the smell of his own dung." Another beacon of the age, the British natural philosopher Sir Francis Bacon, was so intrigued with the topic that he invented a taxonomy, with four categories: "The Ordinary Flatterer," "The Cunning Flatterer," "The Impudent Flatterer," and "The Arch-Flatterer."

But what of American flattery? Of course the courts of Renaissance Europe were obsessed with flattery. We've seen *Shakespeare in Love*. We know they were a bunch of scheming sissies. But what about the honest, plain-vanilla U.S. of A.?

In our early days, we were indeed an exception. America was the place for people who couldn't abide the ass-kissing and courtly conniving that was required for self-advancement in the Old World. We were a nation of Puritans and adventurers, who came here so we wouldn't have to flatter anyone. Indeed, as Stengel notes, the faith of the Puritans was rooted in the notion that God could not be flattered with the indulgences and saintly interventions that were the stuff of Roman Catholicism, much less through the state-ordained piety of the Anglican Church. The Puritan God had already chosen His elect, and what He despised most was the vanity that imagined that good works—human flattery of God—could get anyone into Heaven.

What's more, flattery was for pansies: "Flattery in America was seen as unmanly," writes Stengel. "Truth was straight and hard and masculine, and anything that departed from it, like flattery, was regarded as effeminate ... You can't flatter the Marlboro Man, and he won't flatter you."

That's the American ideal, to this day. But, dear reader, we flatter ourselves if we imagine that we are immune from this universal and timeless disease. There is a particular modern American form of flattery spawned by our anxious meritocracy: We flatter intellect; we flatter cynicism; we flatter anti-flattery. As Stengel observes, "In a democracy, the courtiers are us. The court is everywhere and everyone is a courtier and everyone is a king." Stengel selects Dale Carnegie as our culture's version of Plutarch and Castiglione. And he offers vivid examples that show why *How to Win Friends and Influence People*

is a rawer and shrewder how-to manual than our decadent European friends would ever have dared to write.

Stengel selects Washington, D.C. as one of the capitals of modern flattery—"in some ways closer to the courts of Renaissance Europe than it is to our modern era." As this magazine has been documenting for more than three decades, this is a city of courtiers, with cultural rituals that must be decoded by journo-anthropologists.

But it must be said that *The Washington Monthly* is losing this battle—especially among the newly dominant elite, the journalists. Government officials become more pale and docile by the year—they're barely worth the trouble to flatter. Who really cares what any member of Congress thinks of you? Or even a cabinet secretary? What devastating blow can Donna Shalala deliver to anyone's career or reputation?

But the journalists grow more fat and viperous by the day. They've steadily been accreting power since Nixon's departure, and through their sublime mix of flattery and back-stabbing, they now rule the town. The court of the media is where the action takes place today, and what a wonderland it is. It's an elite that gets to be anti-elitist; a corps of hypocrites that can fasten on others' hypocrisy; a carnival of flatterers who insist their vocation is asking "tough questions." A clever flatterer in the Washington press corps, with the right haircut and a bit of that essential *spezzatura* ... why there's almost nothing he or she can't hope to accomplish. We could use a modern Castiglione to take their measure, but for now, Stengel's essay will do nicely. ●

Class Action

The good and the bad alternatives to affirmative action

By Richard D. Kahlenberg

CRITICS OF AFFIRMATIVE ACTION FALL INTO two major camps: those who focus almost exclusively on what they're against (racial preferences), and those who know not only what they oppose, but also what they support. The annihilators are so firmly against the use of race—and see so little merit in the other side—that they are not particularly concerned about what replaces affirmative action. The Manhattan Insti-

tute's Abigail Thernstrom, for example, says so long as race is not part of the equation, she does not care how universities decide admission. "They can throw applications down the stairs," she told the U.S. Civil Rights Commissions. "They can have a dart board as far as I'm concerned." The builders, by contrast, see strong competing arguments over affirmative action, and although they come down against the use of race, they spend a good deal of time figuring out alternative ways to achieve important objectives of affirmative action—fairness, equal opportunity, and integration.

**CREATING EQUAL:
My Fight Against
Race Preferences**
By Ward Connerly
Encounter Books,
\$24.00

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