

The Wolf and the Neighborly Community

Patricia Lines

. . . Power into will, will into appetite;
And appetite, an universal wolf,
So doubly seconded with will and power,
Must make perforce an universal prey,
And last eat up himself.

—Shakespeare, *Troilus and Cressida*, I, iii

THE WOLF is always at the door. I refer to man's baser appetites and a propensity to prey upon one's fellow. Christians call it original sin; Peter Viereck, preferring a nontheological term, calls it "the inherent residue of perpetual evil in man and history."¹ When serious thinkers consider it, they come inevitably to the conclusion that restraint is necessary. Most of them believe that government will provide that restraint. Machiavelli implores the prince to exercise all his stately power to this end: "Men are always wicked at bottom, unless they are made good by some compulsion."² Hobbes grounds his political theory on a mutual fear of one's fellow man and the necessity to secure an agreement among men to subordinate their predatory impulses. The need to protect property from such predatory impulses drove the political theory of Locke. This view of human nature permeated the political philosophy of the founders of the American republic. Alexander Hamilton, for example, asks, "Why has government been instituted at all? Because the passions of men will not conform to the dictates of reason and justice, without constraint."³

Governments, however, are composed of humans and,

Patricia Lines is a Research Associate at the U.S. Department of Education, and (when on leave) a Visiting Associate Professor and holder of the Hayes Chair in Education Policy at The Catholic University of America. This article was prepared by the author in her private capacity. The views are the author's; no official support by the U.S. Department of Education is intended, and none should be inferred.

therefore, are as corruptible. Worse, a well-organized state in the hands of unscrupulous rulers infinitely increases their capacity to prey on others. This is true whether government is composed of one, few, or many. Government by one can be called tyranny, with all the negative connotations that term has acquired over time. Government by the few places a check on the tyrant but not on the few. While Edmund Burke, John Adams and many others were willing to trust in tradition to check rule by an aristocracy, others feared the transformation of aristocracy into plutocracy. Thomas Jefferson, in his *Notes on Virginia*, expressed much unhappiness over the failure of his own commonwealth to achieve a true balance of power, and the resulting concentration of power in the hands of the legislature:

One hundred and seventy-three despots would surely be as oppressive as one. . . . As little will it avail us, that they are chosen by ourselves. An *elective despotism* was not the government we fought for; but one which should not only be founded on free principles, but in which the

"Governments are composed of humans and, therefore, are as corruptible. Worse, a well-organized state in the hands of unscrupulous rulers infinitely increases their capacity to prey on others. This is true whether government is composed of one, few, or many."

powers of government should be so divided and balanced among several bodies of magistracy, as that no one could transcend their legal limits, without being effectually checked and restrained by the others. . . . The judiciary and executive members were left dependent on the legislative for their subsistence in office, and some of them for their continuance in it. If, therefore, the legislature assumes executive and judiciary powers, no opposition is likely to be made; nor, if made, can be effectual

Jefferson's words comprise the heart of the *Federalist Papers*, no. 48, and the next several papers. James Madison quotes his mentor extensively, to launch his proposal for a division of governmental powers. Madison saw the task as