

Letting Foundation

CONNECTIONS

Winter 2006



CONNECTIONS

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A New Book Worth Reading

Politics Is About Relationship

by Harold H. Saunders
New York: Pelgrave Macmillan, 2005

Picture a classic diplomatic scene—perhaps Stalin, Roosevelt, and Churchill side by-side at Yalta, or Nixon and Mao in China. It's easy to interpret these scenes according to a "realist" theory of politics. The leaders have power and are in a position to make decisions. They represent their countries, so it is almost as if the nations themselves were sitting down to negotiate. The countries' interests are their own security, prosperity, and influence. The leaders negotiate rationally to maximize those interests.

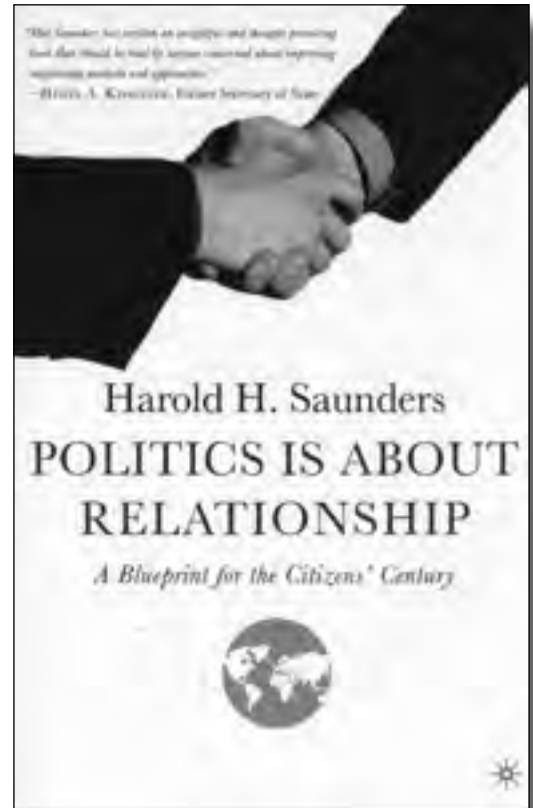
Hal Saunders, Kettering Foundation's Director of International Affairs and a senior American diplomat who flew with Kissinger himself on the "shuttle" flights that advanced peace between Israel and Egypt, is very familiar with that kind of politics. In his new book entitled *Politics Is About Relationship*, he argues that the realist model has never been adequate, either as an explanation of the way the world works or as a normative framework for deciding what we *should* do. Inadequate even in situations like the "carefully managed" relationship between China and the United States of the early 1970s, the realist theory fails utterly to explain such critical developments as the construction of a democratic society in South Africa, the sustainable economic development of poor countries, or the evolving relationship between the U.S. and China today.

The realist account is in fact quite *unrealistic*, because it ignores the following factors (among others). First, political identity is complicated. Roosevelt at Yalta and Nixon in China did not represent a unitary entity called the "United States" with a known set of interests. Rather, these

men had complex identities (as individuals, members of parties and administrations, representatives of their countries, and human beings). Insofar as they represented the United States, *its* identity was complex and constantly contested. They, like their fellow citizens, had choices about how to define America and its interests. Subjects of totalitarian states have fewer evident choices. Yet even Russian and Chinese Communist officials had identities that were subject to change. As soon as Soviet diplomats stopped identifying as representatives of Communism or of the U.S.S.R. and began seeing themselves as Russians, the Soviet Empire was over.

The realist picture also focuses too narrowly on the few people who hold the conspicuous power to issue orders—especially orders to armies and navies. There are always other players and other forms of power. Again, the U.S. opening to China represents an apparent example of realist politics, since just four men initially drove the diplomatic process, operating in near secrecy, and thinking mainly of national security interests. Yet it mattered enormously that U.S. public opinion had already turned in favor of peace with China. Millions of Americans were players. Moreover, the relationship between the United States and China had already been launched by decades of missionary activity, immigration, trade, and cultural exchanges. These interactions created perceptions, stereotypes, habits, and modes of relating between the two nations that had enormous impact on Kissinger, Nixon, Zhou Enlai, and Mao, despite the apparent power and freedom of these leaders.

What was true when Nixon went to China applies much more clearly today. Now that the Chinese government has relaxed control over many aspects of



Chinese life and there is a net annual flow of almost \$200 billion from individual American consumers and firms to Chinese companies, the relationship is evidently between two complex "bodies politic" and not simply between two sets of national leaders. Identity, culture, perception, and modes of interaction are essential.

In Chapter IX, co-written with Philip D. Stewart, Saunders examines the evolving relationship between Russia and the U.S. since 1989. By observing public deliberations about Russian-American relations, Saunders and Stewart learned that a major issue is the enormous consumption of U.S. popular culture in Russia. Hollywood-produced movies and American popular music threaten to erode Russian civilization; at the same time, they present the U.S. in a light that many Americans may resent. (In our movies, we appear to be violent, sexually prurient, and spiritually vacant.) The flow of pop culture is a significant problem, but not one caused by governments. "While American companies certainly produce these films, it is Russian television executives who choose to show [them]. These decisions are normally made on commercial grounds, that is, the

anticipated audience the film can draw, and thus advertising revenues. In this case, the influences on a most sensitive aspect of relationship—Russians' pride in their culture—are multisided, complex, and not subject to direct or central control by either side."

One Russian citizen says, "Yes, America influences our lives, but why do we permit them to influence us to such a degree?" If there is a solution, it will necessarily involve creative work by thousands or millions of citizens in both countries who find better ways to represent themselves.

Another important chapter tells the story of the democratic transformation in South Africa after apartheid. This case clearly demonstrates that realism is unrealistic. The apartheid government possessed the only army and police force in the country; it seemed to have all the power. Stalin had asked, "How many divisions has the Pope?" and he could have asked the same patronizing question about Nelson Mandela in his prison cell. Nevertheless, the apartheid regime crumbled (much against the wishes of its leaders) and a new society was born without a bloodbath.

The explanation must lie, first, in the capacity of white South Africans to modify their identities, their understanding of their own self-interests, and their stereotypes of blacks. Second, there were dialogues among the white, colored, and black populations that took place over a long period in various venues, with various purposes and styles. The result of all that talk was a deep, complex, difficult, but substantially positive relationship among three (or more) peoples. Third, there were valuable cultural resources in black South African culture, especially a traditional commitment to peaceful consensus, the philosophy of *ubuntu*, which understands human value in terms of relationships, and Christian ethics.

Saunders' domestic American example, which focuses on the West Virginia Center for Civic Life, demonstrates that it is important for some people to be deliberately and self-consciously concerned about the civic infrastructure. To be sure, democratic politics and international affairs are mostly interactions among people who hold particular values and views. Political energy comes from people who

want something—not always money or power, but sometimes a particular vision of their community. Nevertheless, some citizens should strive for neutrality so that they can create trusted forums in which other citizens can talk and work. The West Virginia Center for Civic Life is a perfect example.

Betty Knighton is the center's director. She says, "We have defined the Center for Civic Life as aggressively neutral." Knighton's stance might be better described as "open-ended." She surely has goals for her state; she's not neutral. The work that she promotes is likely to favor certain political outcomes over others. Nevertheless, Knighton is willing to create a good democratic and deliberative process and then let the chips fall where they may. One of Saunders' South African sources, Pravin Gordhan, similarly "insists" that the peace process that ended apartheid "was a way of acting, not a well defined or carefully masterminded strategy." Such openness is crucial.

In my view, Saunders brilliantly demonstrates the power of citizen politics in the twenty-first century. The most realistic view is that millions or billions of people now shape international affairs through their talk, their opinions, and their behavior. It is, however, a different question whether citizen politics is inevitably better than state-centered power politics.

South Africa is an inspiring example, but it's also worth considering Yugoslavia. Under Marshall Tito, a few "bosses" met to negotiate scarce economic goods. The country was undemocratic and not very dynamic, but it was at peace. Once many Yugoslavs became involved in politics, once national identity became a topic of discussion, and once people began to think about their overall relationships with other ethnic communities, "hell" broke out.

In general, citizens don't negotiate fine details; they consider fundamental problems and debate their own identity. Unfortunately, for many Serbs, the fundamental "problem" was the alleged trampling of Serbian identity ever since the battle of

Kosovo Polje in 1389.

To be sure, Saunders would have handled the dialogues among Yugoslavs infinitely better than Slobodan Milosevic and his peers. He would have worked for relationships "based on equality, mutuality, accountability, input, access to decision-making, shared and accountable stewardship of resources." Nevertheless, I think it's fair to say that the civil war in Yugoslavia accompanied an *increase* in the role of citizens and a *broadening* of public discourse to include identities and relationships. I can imagine a darker version of Saunders' book, one that predicted a shift from elite economic negotiations to broad citizen engagement on matters of culture and identity—with lots of bloodshed along the way.

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Nevertheless, it would be impossible to overstate the importance of what Saunders has achieved through his experimental engagement with actual citizen politics on several continents, his clear-sighted and eloquent analysis of cases, and his overall theoretical framework.

—Peter Levine

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The Kettering Foundation, chartered in 1927, is a research foundation—not a grant-giving foundation—rooted in the American tradition of inventive research. Its founder, Charles F. Kettering, holder of more than 200 patents, is best known for his invention of the automobile self-starter. He was interested, above all, in seeking practical answers to “the problems behind the problems.”

The foundation today continues in that tradition. The objective of the research now is to study what helps democracy work as it should. Six major Kettering programs are designed to shed light on what is required to strengthen public life.

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