

DEMOCRACY IN AMERICA: HOW ARE WE DOING? WE'RE DOING OUR BEST TO MAKE THE ANSWER "BADLY"

By Burns W. Roper

In his dramatic press conference in which he bowed out as Defense Secretary-designee, retired Admiral "Bobby" Inman said that at his present stage of life, he would not submit himself and his family to the abuse by press and Congress that he foresaw accompanying his confirmation hearings. His message carried the strong warning that government will suffer because good people will increasingly refuse to subject themselves to the privacy invasion and character assassination that have become a part of public service. Was Inman right?

I have been unable to find survey data which deal *directly* with the question. But there are data which are highly suggestive of answers and are certainly related to Inman's contention. Some of them are shown in Figures 1 and 2 and in Table 1. Others are included in Public Opinion Report coverage of American democratic performance in this issue's center section.

Whereas nearly three-quarters of the public in 1958 felt you could trust our government to do the right thing all or most of the time, less than one-quarter feel so now (Figure 1). Those in government-related occupations are at the very bottom of the list of occupational groups thought well of (Table 1). While the largest percentage in 1937 subscribed to the view that Congress "is about as good

as representative body as is possible for a large nation to have," the largest percentage in 1990 endorsed the statement that "Congressmen spend more time thinking of their own political futures than they do in passing wise legislation" (Figure 2). Other recent surveys have found that nearly half the public think "quite a few"

politicians.³

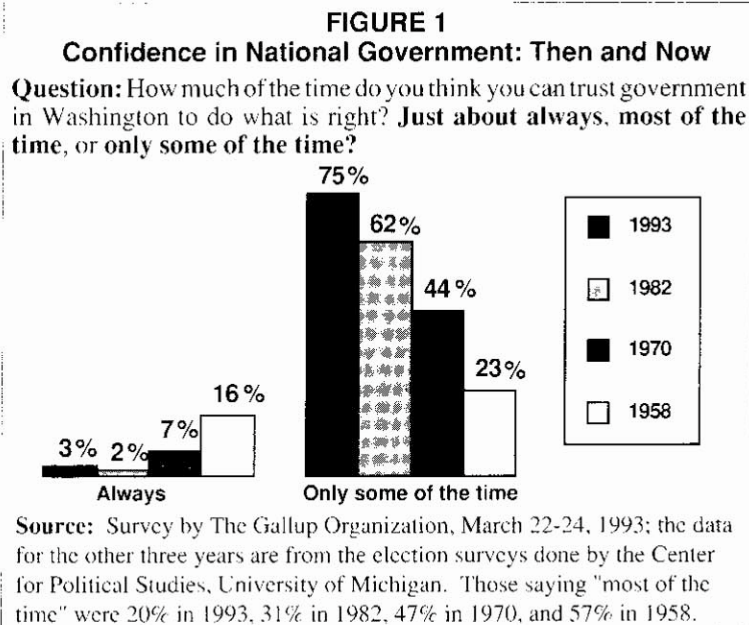
How did the public come to this dark view of government and government officials? I have my own notions as to how it all came about and why it is continuing to get worse, but I know of no poll data that would either validate or invalidate them.

And I cannot conceive of any poll data that would prove or disprove some of my ideas. Example: It is clear from poll data that people believe that members of Congress are less honest today than they used to be. This does not mean, of course, that they actually *are* less honest. No poll question can resolve that question. It's a matter of fact, not public opinion. I'm not even sure how to determine the fact. Poll data clearly show that public confidence in government and the governors has fallen. But it does not, and in some areas cannot, show *how* it happened.

Looking for Answers

So, from this point on, what I say will be conjecture and hypothesis—*personal* opinion, not public opinion. Personal opinion that stems from a long career of observing and studying public opinion, but personal opinion nevertheless, not public opinion.

One might ask why it matters *how* the public came to its low opinion. It matters because *any* government, but particularly a democracy, cannot long endure without



of those running the government are "crooked," but only one in nine think "hardly any" are;¹ and that while most feel the honesty of Congressmen is comparable to that of the general public those who do not (33%) are *overwhelmingly* of the opinion that Congressmen are less honest than most people.² Finally, and more directly linked to Inman's warning, twice as many people are concerned about the problem of getting good people in government as about rooting out corrupt

the basic support of its people. Even Hitler could not have long ruled Germany by force of arms alone. The support of a significant minority, if not an actual majority, was essential to his rule. It's important to know *how* the US public got to its present state of low trust and support so that trust and support can be restored.

It seems to me that there is a process of interaction—one might say a vicious circle—involving the press, the public, and the politicians which has brought us to our present state. Let me attempt to deal with each of these groups separately—as separately as is possible with three interacting groups.

The Press

While it's my opinion that the press started it all, this is not to say that it is all the press's fault. Being the "firstest" doesn't necessarily mean being the "mostest". Nevertheless, I think the press bears a significant responsibility for the low regard in which government and its leaders are held. First off, the Washington press corps has grown enormously over the last half-century. We now have more people reporting more things.

The press used to have a far more comfortable relationship—in some respects a protective relationship—with government and government leaders. It went along with FDR's desire to conceal the fact that he was substantially crippled by polio. It did not trumpet his reported continuing affair with Marguerite LeHand. Had Clinton run for president in 1940 to 1952 we probably would have heard little, if anything, about Gennifer Flowers. In a society which now talks openly of homosexuality and penises, anything—or almost anything—goes with today's press.

Finally, for whatever reasons, the press has changed from being a partner of government to being an adversary of government. While ostensibly letting the sunshine in and holding government's feet to the fire at the same time it is constantly attacking, relentlessly criticiz-

ing. In my opinion, it thus helps erode the public's confidence in its government.

The Public

One of the big changes over the last 50 or 60 years has been the granting of rights to people who never had them before, or had them only on paper—blacks, other minorities, women, and what might be termed "little people". Many have become acutely aware and highly assertive of their newly won/newly bestowed rights, if not yet of the

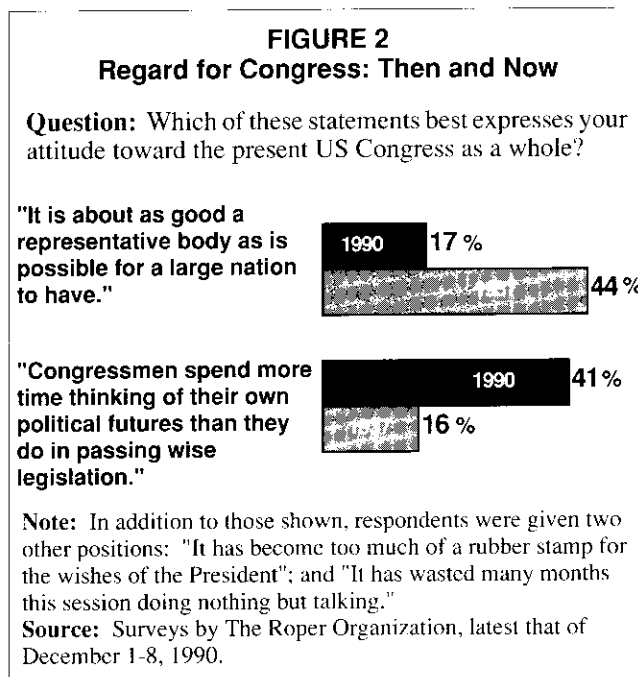
But I think there is more. After 50 to 60 years of unprecedented growth and an expansion of the "middle class" to include all but the bottom 10 or 15% of the population, people's expectations are almost limitless today. There is no reason why we can't have everything—including lower taxes. Increasingly, that's what we have come to expect.

And with much more press attention to the Washington scene, the public is more aware of Congress, the president, the Secretary of State, etc., than ever before. They are in people's living rooms every day. "But they are not giving me what I demand and am entitled to."

While the public is more aware of Washington, it does not understand very well that a major function of government—specifically Congress, but the other branches, too—is to compromise or reconcile conflicting interests and goals. People seek dynamic action. This is why candidates tout their experience as "businessmen"—take-charge types—and accounts for Ross Perot's appeal. Congress, however, must reconcile: abortion and right to life; increasing taxes to provide wanted—expected—services and lowering taxes to encourage investment and ease the burden on

the little guy; protecting jobs at home and encouraging free trade; doing something to end the tragedy in Yugoslavia, and not getting mired in another Vietnam, etc., etc., etc.

Today, compromise is seen as capitulation, a half-loaf as failure. And with it all, our obsession with checks and balances grows and grows. A Democratic Congress and a Republican president are often preferred to one-party control. But that's not enough. Now we need a balanced budget amendment: "Prevent us from spending, spending, spending"—by law, not restraint. And term limits: "Keep me from re-electing those same crooks/jerks/idiots I always vote for."



responsibilities that go with those rights. This has manifested itself in a "what I want or else" mentality, as opposed to a "for the good of us all" attitude and a grateful acceptance of whatever may come my way. This, in turn, may explain the rise in single-issue politics. "I demand freedom of choice!" and "I demand an end to abortion!"—whereas I never used to "demand" anything.

This increase in rights, this rise in independence, causes people to stop looking at members of Congress and government officials generally as people who know best. They are now servants to do "my" bidding. "If you don't vote right on abortion, you're finished!"

The Politicians

In a sense, the politicians, the office holders, are the victims of the bolder and bigger press, and the newly empowered and entitled public. But in another sense they are the "accomplices" who have made it all possible. They are the Quislings, the Vichyites, who have collaborated with their abusers to soften the abuse on them and their colleagues, or to gain short-term political advantage by establishing that "I am not one of those scurrilous, incompetent crooks that you rightfully disdain."

I said that I thought the press was first in this vicious circle of press, public, and politician, but "first" did not mean "most." Similarly I think the politicians are last in the circle but "last" does not mean "least." Politicians have actively contributed to the public's perception that "Politicians are no damn good." At campaign time just listen to one candidate criticize his opponent on personal grounds. Corruption, laziness, women, substance abuse, immorality! Who is in a better position to know how sleazy politicians are than a politician! And members rarely explain the role of Congress, its inherently deliberative nature. They don't defend compromise as being its proper role, rather than an act of cowardice or weakness.

They don't defend their collective actions or their institutions; instead they join—or even lead—the attack. A refreshing exception was minority leader Bob Michel who, in announcing his retirement, said he thought politics was an honorable profession and that he had conformed to ethical standards that he thought his parents would be proud of.

They waffle or evade on highly charged issues—abortion, for example. That I can fully understand, if not totally agree with. You can't satisfy both the confirmed right-to-lifers and the dedicated freedom-of-choicers; and their attacks are withering! But you can take a position—and even survive. Governor

Cuomo and Governor Carey before him both took forthright positions against the death penalty. Carey survived and, to date at least, so has Cuomo.

and around it goes.

In my judgment it is government leaders who must take the lead in reversing the situation. They should stand up to the public and the press more; they should do a far better job of educating the public about the role of government. If government won't defend itself, who will? Silence will be interpreted as an admission of guilt.

In closing, let me back off a little. Disdain for government and government officials is not new. (But there is evidence it is worse today.) Criticism of government and government leaders by the press is not new. (But it is more intense now. It is more voluminous, with a larger press corps working at it; the medium—TV—strengthens the message.) Public criticism of politicians and government leaders is not new. (But in recent years it has gotten much worse.) The desire of elected officials to placate the public is not new. (But there comes a time when one must fight back!)

Endnotes

¹ Question: Do you think that quite a few of the people running the government are crooked, not very many people are, or do you think hardly any of them are crooked? Responses: "Quite a few crooked," 46%; "Not very many crooked," 42%; "Hardly any crooked," 11%; "Don't know/No opinion," 1%. Survey by ABC News/Washington Post, October 1991.

² Question: Generally, do you think members of Congress are more honest than most people, more dishonest, or about the same? Responses: "More honest than most people," 2%; "More dishonest," 33%; "About the same," 65%. Survey by ABC News, August 1993.

³ Question: What's the bigger problem these days: that corrupt politicians are not being weeded out, or that too many well qualified people are reluctant to go into public office? Responses: "Corrupt politicians not being weeded out," 31%; "Qualified people are reluctant," 64%; "Don't know," 5%. Survey by Princeton Survey Research Associates, January 1994.

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board of directors*

TABLE 1
**Regard for Government Officials:
Comparison to Other Fields**

Question: For each occupation/profession would you tell me whether you have a generally high opinion of them, a fairly good opinion of them, not too good an opinion, or a poor opinion of them?

	High and Fairly Good	
	High	Fairly Good
Teachers	46%	91%
Clergy	42	84
Police officers	36	84
Doctors	31	82
Business people	13	77
Advertising people	9	61
Reporters	12	61
Corporate executives	5	51
Labor leaders	9	50
Lawyers	11	49
Federal agency officials	5	43
US Senators	5	39
Members of Congress	4	35
Politicians	3	24

Source: Survey by The Roper Organization, October 17-24, 1992.

The more the press attacks, the more critical and demanding the public gets. The more vocal and strident the public gets, the more Congress evades and obfuscates. The more Congress tries to have it both ways, the more the press attacks. The shriller the press gets, the more contempt for Congress the public shows. The more Congressmen are attacked, the more they try to hide, or separate themselves from the rest of their colleagues. Around