Jean Bethke Elshstain

Sovereignty

In working on *The Language of Liberty*, I found that virtually all the terms, even those that seemed least complicated, held unexpected depths. If this was true of *committee* and *vice president*, how much more so of those such as *sovereignty*, where one expects complexity? On the surface, sovereignty translates well enough as "supreme power." Thus, in the United States, the people are sovereign: the power and legitimacy of the government is based on their will and that will, transmitted through elected officials, drives policy making. Yet there is a great deal more to the term, and a little digging leads quickly to enigmas deep in our political traditions.

Jean Bethke Elshtain, in her book *Sovereignty: God, State, and Self*, proves to be an exceptional guide to the meanings of the term and its history. The book's subtitle indicates where she will take readers, and she opens with some challenging theological ground work. In Christian and Jewish tradition, of course, God, creator of all, is sovereign and His will and commandments are to be obeyed without exception.

And yet, as Elshtain points out, what this means for us humans is no simple matter. For another essential truth in Christian and Jewish traditions is that none of us is God and even the best can only "see through the glass darkly." So translating God's sovereign will into practice action is a matter of strongly opposed interpretations.

The problems inherent in interpreting God's will lead to another fateful understanding crucial to western political tradition: the definition of two spheres in our affairs, one eternal and sacred, the other secular and earthly. The sphere of eternity is the higher and more important and priestly powers reign there. In the secular sphere, the king reigns rather than the priest, and the goal is prudent action

rather than spiritual perfection. In this so-called "two swords" theory, where authority is divided between sacred and secular institutions, the separation has often been uneasy, since, after all, there is no clear distinction in ordinary life between them. Secular governing will inevitably intersect with deep moral questions—whether a given war is just, for example—that are difficult or impossible to disentangled from religious commitments.

If this theological background seems unnecessary to us today, it is not really. Even if some prefer to keep religion and politics separate, historically the two have been deeply entwined. Moreover, there are deep patterns in human affairs, crossing cultures and times, including the strong tendency to fuse government with some transcendent moral, or even spiritual, order. Thus taking God out of the equation doesn't prevent us from finding some other sovereign to invest with ultimate authority. The Soviets, who could not have been more fulsomely atheist in their rhetoric, invested aggressively this way, in state power serving the interests of workers—and left mountains of corpses as the legacy of their hubris.

So how do we deal with the felt need for a sovereign authority on the one hand and our inherent, human limitations on the other? The framers of the United States Constitution provided a practical answer without addressing the question head on. As noted above, their answer was to locate that power in the people, with, however, certain limitations as to what the sovereign people could legitimately do through government. Those limitations can be found in the Bill of Rights and elsewhere.

The will of the people would be expressed through elections and that expressed will would be sovereign. Thus, a great deal depends on the qualities of the people and, one might add, on their culture. John Adams wrote that "Our Constitution was made only for a moral and religious people. It is inadequate to the government of any other."

Yet having said that the people are sovereign, we find ourselves confronting new dimensions of the sovereignty enigma. If the people are sovereign, for instance, who are the people we are actually talking about—a simple majority of the electorate? Must the decisions of this majority be seen as somehow correct no

matter what they decide? If not, is there some order or standard by which the majority is rightfully judged, which would suggest that the sovereignty of the people is limited (and thus not truly sovereign). Think of Martin Luther King, Jr. and his condemnation of segregation, which was, after all, based on popularly enacted laws.

The sovereignty quandary has another dimension as it relates to the will of the people. John Adams writes that our Constitution is suited to a moral and religious people. It seems likely that we are less moral than we once were, at least by Adams's standards, but we might also be less of a *people*. We are surely a more diverse people than we once were, but also more individualistic. Elshtain speaks here of the rise of "those micro states proclaimed as 'sovereign selves.'" In recent decades we have undergone what political scientists call a "rights revolution," much of which focuses on the claims of individuals to defy certain traditional or prevailing norms—the right to burn the American flag as a form of protest, to take just one highly publicized example. This revolution has been remarkably successful, but has left us with much less sense of shared, authoritative norms. The will of the people is fragmented and weakened to the point where it can hardly be described as sovereign in any real sense.

This is where Jean Bethke Elshtain's exploration of sovereignty ends, having previously touched on its relation to God and State. The self reigns sovereign in crucial respects and seeks to expand its realm. Tech gurus such as Ray Kurzweil even promise that something like computer-based immortality will soon be available to humans, at least to those rich enough to pay for it. In the face of such vaulting ambitions, Elshtain counsels humility and Christian love as antidotes to the dangers of the sovereign self, but the tides running the other way are strong. For the foreseeable future we will need, it seems, to learn how to live in the absence of any coherent, sovereign authority and with a dramatically declining sense of shared obligations.

Two final notes about Jean Bethke Elshtain's *Sovereignty: God, State and Self*. First, the political situation has changed over the years since it was published, and while the sovereign self remains, the State has recently been showing some unusual

ambitions of its own. We can see this in the movement to end "systemic racism," which could lead to critical extensions of government action, unpopular with many or even most people, into the daily life of the supposedly sovereign people. Such extensions can already be seen in public education in a number of states.

The second note is especially for budding scholars. Elshtain's book is the published form of her 2005 Gifford Lectures. This series, historically given at Edinburgh, Scotland, dates back over 100 years and is, as Jacques Barzun said, "the highest honor in a philosopher's career." The lectures deal with intersecting issues of religion, science, and philosophy, and have been given by the heaviest of hitters, a veritable "murderer's row" of thinkers. I can only speak to those I've read, but they are excellent, including not only Elshtain's book but Reinhold Niebuhr's *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Roger Scruton's *The Face of God*, and *The Road of Science and the Ways to God* by the remarkable Stanley Jaki. If young political scholars are looking to expand their horizon with some off-season reading, the Gifford Lectures provide exceptionally rich fare.