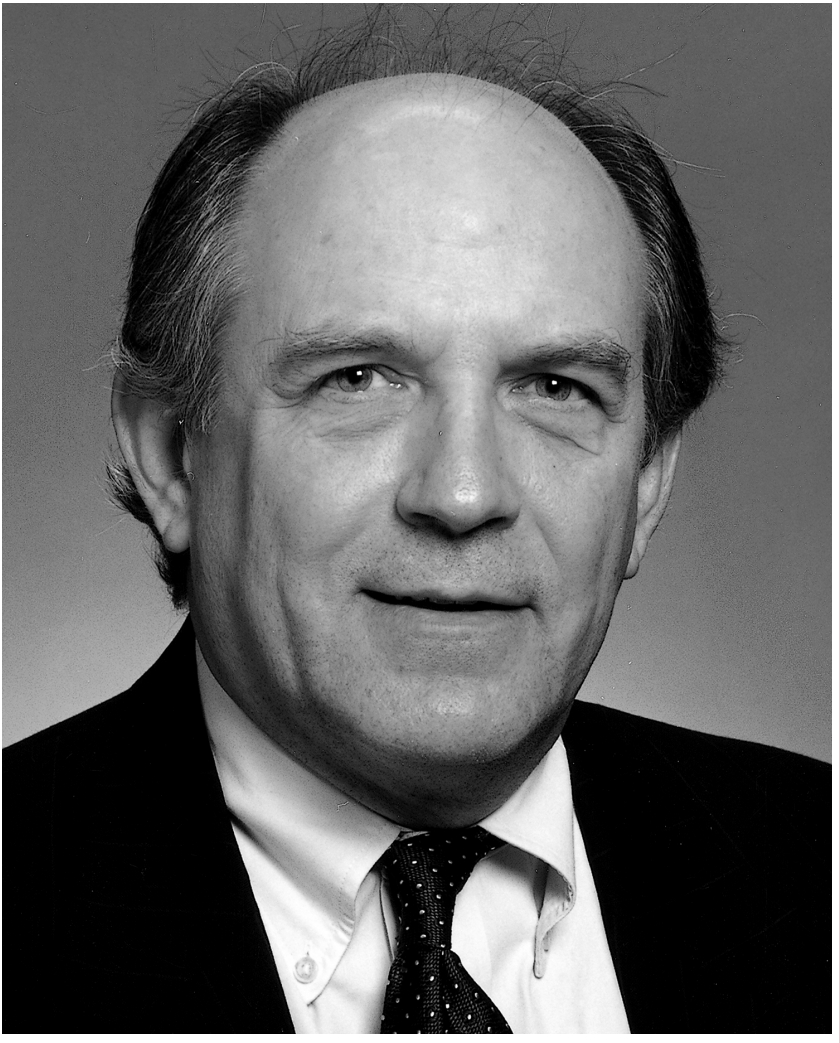
In Pursuit: Of Happiness and Good Government



Charles Murray

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To Catherine

This book especially

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Prologue

The roots of this book go down twenty years. It was the spring of 1968 in Thailand, an insurgency was in progress in the northeastern part of the country, and the Thai and American governments were pouring resources into rural development—the Thai version of winning the hearts and minds of the people. Fresh out of the Peace Corps, I was leading the fieldwork for a case study of four villages. We wanted to interview villagers about the development projects in their communities and, more generally, about what they thought of the Thai officials in their district. We wouldn't try to force the villagers' responses into multiple-choice boxes; rather, we would just let them talk and then we would write down what they said, however they chose to say it.

After a few weeks in our first set of two villages, I was convinced the research was going to be a failure. The interviews were turning up only the most casual mentions of either the development projects or government officials. We weren't going to have enough data to analyze. So the Thai interviewers and I tried a variety of fixes. None worked. We were confident that the villagers were being candid with us, but probe as we might, the conversation kept veering away from the topics that were important to us. Instead, the villagers talked at length about the affairs of the village. Sometimes it was about the family next door, the price of kenaf, or the new bus service into the market town. Often it was about governance—not the governance of the nation or of the district, however, but governance of the village.

The accounts that unfolded were far different from the ones I had expected. For while my two years in the Peace Corps had taken me to many villages, I had always approached them as a "change agent," as that role was called in those days. We change agents had been enjoined to "consider the needs of the people" and "encourage local participation," much as change agents back in the States were calling for "maximum feasible participation" in community development

projects. But my experience had been that villagers seemed never to get anything done. Give a project to the village, and it would bog down. Now, with the chance to sit back and just listen, I was hearing about all the things that village headmen and committees (*their* committees, home-grown) did when the change agents weren't around. They ranged from major projects like building a reservoir to day-to-day functions like reconciling marital disputes. Sometimes the mechanisms were sophisticated: progressive taxation to finance repairs to a village hall, renting a grader to make a road, designating one villager to go away to learn brickmaking so he could teach the others. Sometimes the mechanisms were simple. Not everything was always done well. In one of the two villages, the main topic of conversation was how to remove an incompetent headman. But good or bad, the governance of the village's affairs was at the center of interest.

As the interviews accumulated, I had to face the fact that the villagers' concerns were anchored in things that we weren't asking questions about. Then another thought hit me: *They were right.* The conditions that made for a happy or unhappy village had much more to do with the things they were interested in than with the things I was interested in.

My small epiphany had nothing to do with theories of social change, just the simple truth that Alexis de Tocqueville had in mind when he began his examination of American political institutions, one hemisphere and more than a century removed. "It is not by chance that I consider the township first," he wrote in *Democracy in America:*

> The township is the only association so well rooted in nature that wherever men assemble it forms itself. Communal society therefore exists among all peoples, whatever be their customs and laws. Man creates kingdoms and republics, but townships seem to spring directly from the hand of God.[1]

Had I read Tocqueville more thoroughly in my college days and remembered it better, I would have seen much more quickly how the villages worked and how effective "development" in them came about:

> It is in the township, the center of the ordinary business of life, that the desire for esteem [and] the pursuit of substantial interests . . .

> are concentrated; these passions, so often troublesome elements in society, take on a different character when exercised so close to home and, in a sense, within the family circle. . . . Daily duties performed or rights exercised keep municipal life constantly alive. There is a continual gentle political activity which keeps society on the move without turmoil.[2]

But it did not occur to me to consult my foggy memories of Tocqueville in trying to understand what I was observing. These were Thai villages in 1968, not New England townships in 1831.

The half-formed thoughts that came to me during the early stages of the research were brought more sharply into focus as the research proceeded. One of the next two villages we chose was a model village, the pride of the Mukdahan District. An energetic and engaging young Thai official had been imported into the community and had brought about a cascade of development projects—a fishpond, a new school building, a cotton-growing project, a rice cooperative, even a health clinic. This time, we were sure we would get material about our assigned topic, for in this village the official Thai government was very much a part of current village life.

We first occupied ourselves with trying to find how each individual project had affected the village. (Were there fish in the fishpond? How many people used the health clinic? How had these projects affected the villagers' lives?) Again, we ran into a problem. The villagers' answers about the effects of any individual project were short. But their discussions of the ways in which the life of the village had changed overall were spontaneous and subtle and deeply felt—and the news was not good. The energetic and engaging young official had taken over (with the best interests of the villagers at heart), and in so doing had supplanted the mechanisms by which the villagers ran their village and pursued their lives. The villagers said plainly and without qualification that the life in this model village had gotten worse, not better.

Well, you can't make an omelet without breaking eggs, right? It's too bad, but one of the costs of modernization is the breakdown of some quaint old-fashioned ways. They'll adapt to it after a while. Such were the assumptions I had brought to the work. But it was hard to

listen to these villagers and be as confident as before. Again, it would have helped me to understand what had happened if I had remembered Tocqueville:

> The difficulty of establishing a township's independence rather augments than diminishes with the increase of enlightenment of nations. A very civilized society finds it hard to tolerate attempts at freedom in a local community; it is disgusted by its numerous blunders and is apt to despair of success before the experiment is finished.[3]

And again: "The institutions of a local community can hardly struggle against a strong and enterprising government."[4] And yet again: "If you take power and independence from a municipality, you may have docile subjects but you will not have citizens."[5]

I still did not see as acutely as Tocqueville, but I began to entertain a suspicion that within a few more weeks had become another small epiphany in that spring of 1968: Once again, *the villagers were right.* The things being lost in that village were at least as important as the things being added. The losses involved deterioration in the bedrock functions performed by any community, in Missouri or Brooklyn as in Northeast Thailand—settling neighbors' disputes, helping people in need, solving common problems. These in turn represented the bedrock resources for the individuals' pursuit of their private lives. The village had been doing a damned good job of filling those functions—not according to a romanticized Rousseauistic image of noble villagers, but by any standard for a civilized community. The conventional wisdom of development policy said that modernization must transfer functions and powers from communities to larger units. I began to ask myself a question that twenty years later I ask of contemporary America in this book: Are we really sure that's a good idea?

I did not subsequently try to stand athwart the bows of rural modernization yelling "Stop!" I continued to think (as I do today) that it is a good thing for villages to acquire fishponds and health clinics. When I returned to the United States, I continued to think (as I do today) that it is a good thing for hungry people to be fed, for the uneducated to be educated, for the disadvantaged to be given a helping

hand. But two thoughts that I brought home from my experience in Thailand never completely left me.

The first was a notion that what I had seen in small rice-farming communities was relevant to complex American communities. The thought took a long time to mature; the reasons to resist were for a long time overwhelming. But I finally came to rest in the belief that Jeffersonian democracy is still the best way to run society, including the society in which we find ourselves today. Yes, I am aware that Jefferson himself said the earth is for the living, and that he chided those who "ascribe to the preceding age a wisdom more than human."[6] But it just may be that on certain fundamental questions of government, Jefferson and his colleagues were right more universally than they knew. In particular, they understood that the vitality of communities and the freedom of individuals are intertwined, not competitive.

But that conclusion came very late, as it does in this book. I reached it indirectly, by way of the second thought I brought home from Thailand: Whatever the best of all possible worlds may be, policy analysts have not been doing a very good job of deciding whether we are getting from here to there. By counting whether fishponds have fish and health clinics have patients—or, in America, by counting the number of people under the poverty line or the number of people who receive Medicaid benefits—policy analysts are not just failing to see the forest for the trees. Ultimately, the trees we are counting do not make up the forest of interest.

Policy analysts—and I include myself in the indictment—have been in the position of the drunk in the old joke. You have probably heard it: A man who has had too much to drink is on his hands and knees under a streetlamp searching for something. A passerby comes up and asks him what he is looking for. The drunk points to a nearby house and says that he was unlocking his door and dropped his keys. But, the passerby observes, the door is over there. "I know," the drunk replies, "but the light's better over here."

We have looked where the light is, and for modern policy analysis the light consists of quantitative analysis. I do not say this altogether critically. Give a policy analyst variables that can be expressed in numbers, and he has at hand a powerful array of analytic tools to probe

their meaning. The limitation—and it has become more and more confining over the years—is that so few of the interesting variables in the social sciences can be expressed in numbers. The more complicated the constructs one wants to examine, the less likely that they can be crammed within the quantitative paradigm. Concepts such as "happiness" and "self-respect" and "the nature of man" (you will be running up against all of these and more in the pages that follow) force one to grapple with evidence that crosses the disciplines of economics, sociology, political science, and psychology, and for which hard data are hard to come by and "proof" is usually impossible. And so it is with this book, a queer mixture of hard data, soft data, thought experiments, and speculations.

In such cases, and especially when a book has a controversial point of view, the author should at least be obliged to provide his readers with the equivalent of Informed Consent, telling them in advance where the discussion is headed in both its text and its subtext. In that spirit, this is the way I see *In Pursuit:*

Part 1, "The Happiness of the People," is a statement of purpose and definition of terms. The question is how "success" in social policy is to be measured. I argue that we have been using inadequate measures, and propose that a better idea is to use the pursuit of happiness as a framework for analyzing public policy. Then I discuss the concept of happiness in historical perspective and define how the word "happiness" will be used in the rest of the book. My objective in part 1 is to reach a common understanding about ultimate ends that readers from many perspectives can accept. Acknowledging this common understanding about ultimate ends doesn't imply anything about whether a specific policy will succeed or fail in achieving those ends—such issues remain suspended for many more chapters.

Part 2, "When There Is Bread," will, I hope, be for my readers what it was for me, an excursion into some fascinating topics. They include the uses of money in the pursuit of happiness, what "safety" means, the basis for self-respect, and my personal favorite, how people enjoy themselves. These are what I will call "enabling conditions," the raw material for pursuing happiness. My purpose is to explore each of them, sometimes drawing on recent empirical work, sometimes trying to tease out the implications of questions that don't have hard-and-fast

answers (What is "enough" money? "Enough" safety?), but which lend themselves to more systematic exploration than one might have imagined.

My purpose is also to have fun with these questions, to play with them, and I hope that readers will relax and enjoy. You are not being led down a path that will suddenly leave you stranded in unacceptable company. On the contrary, as I point out in the text, a reader may with perfect consistency agree with the main points of part 2 and still disagree with just about everything I say in part 3.

That having been said, however, it is also true that part 2 presents what I believe to be evidence (even without subsequent interpretation) for fresh ways of looking at social policy, even if it doesn't logically compel one set of solutions. The subtext to part 2 is that old clichés about human lives (money can't buy happiness, the importance of self-respect, and so forth) examined closely not only are true but can powerfully influence one's thinking about policy.

Part 3, "Toward the Best of All Possible Worlds," begins with a proposition which must be true but rarely is acknowledged: Policy analysis is decisively affected by the analyst's conception of human nature. One may consider a government policy to be practical or impractical, safe or hazardous, only according to one's conception of what is good for humans, and that in turn has to be based on one's conclusions about the potentials and limitations of humans acting as social creatures. For decades, the dominant intellectual view in the United States seems to have been that humans acting in the private sphere tend to be uncaring or inept, whereas humans acting in the public sphere tend to serve (or can be made to serve) the common good. I associate myself with the view that humans acting privately tend to be resourceful and benign whereas humans acting publicly are resourceful and dangerous. After explaining the nature of that view and the reasons for it in the opening chapter of part 3, I analyze the policy implications of the preceding chapters from that perspective.

There is within part 3 a change of voice. For two chapters (9 and 10), I argue on behalf of new ways of evaluating results and designing solutions to specific social problems, saying in effect that there are better ways to conduct social policy than our current one even if you prefer reform in small doses. Significant improvements, I argue,

would follow just by changing the frame of reference for perceiving what we are trying to accomplish. In chapters 11 and 12, I use successively broader strokes to present my reading of the implications of the material—implications not just for how we might best tackle specific social problems, but for the larger question, how society is to be organized so that it best serves "the happiness of the people." Chapter 13 closes the book by taking this line of thinking to its ultimate expression.

For many readers, this book will pose more questions than it offers answers. I will be satisfied with that. If we have learned nothing else from our problems in formulating good social policy in recent decades, it is that we need better questions about what we are doing and why. And I continue to hope that the longer the questions are pondered, the better the answers will become.

Charles Murray
Washington, D.C.
March 20, 1988

Part One

"The Happiness of the People"

A good government implies two things; first, fidelity to the object of government, which is the happiness of the people; secondly, a knowledge of the means by which that object can be best attained.

—James Madison

1

Measuring Success in Social Policy

This book is first about how people pursue happiness in their lives, and then about how government can help in that pursuit.

It is not a topic that is easy even to name, for "happiness" is an honorable word fallen on hard times. We have gotten used to happiness as a label for a momentary way of feeling, the state of mind that is the opposite of sad. Happiness is the promised reward of a dozen pop-psychology books on the airport book rack. It is a topic for bumper stickers and the comic strips—happiness as warm puppy. A book on public policy about "happiness"? Surely there is a sturdier contemporary term I might use instead. "Quality of life," perhaps: "This book is about personal quality of life, and what government can do to improve it." Or more respectable yet: "This book is about noneconomic indicators of perceived personal well-being, and their relationship to alternative policy options." But there's no getting around it. Happiness is in fact what we will be talking about.

What Is the Criterion of Success?

The first, natural question is why one might choose to discuss public affairs in terms of this most private and elusive of goals. The pragmatic reason is that policy analysts are increasingly forced in that direction by events. The experience of the last half-century and more specifically of the last two decades must arouse in any thoughtful observer this question: *What constitutes "success" in social policy?*

For most of America's history, this was not a question that needed asking because there was no such thing as a "social policy" to succeed

or fail. The government tried to be helpful to the economy in modest ways. It facilitated the settlement of the frontier. It adjudicated and arbitrated the competing interests of the several states. But, excepting slavery, the noneconomic institutions of American society remained largely outside federal purview until well into the twentieth century. As late as the 1930s, there was still no federal "policy" worthy of the label affecting the family, for example, or education, or religion, or voluntary associations. Some laws could be argued to have effects on such institutions (the child labor laws on the family, for example), but the notion that the federal government had a systematic relationship with the "success" of parents in raising their offspring, of schools in educating their students, or of poor people's efforts to become no longer poor would have struck most observers as perhaps theoretically true, but rather an odd way of looking at things.

Over a period of time from the New Deal through the 1970s, the nation acquired what we have come to call "social policy," with dozens of constituent elements—welfare programs, educational programs, health programs, job programs, criminal justice programs, and laws, regulations, and Supreme Court decisions involving everything from housing to transportation to employment to child care to abortion. Pick a topic of social concern or even of social interest, and by now a complex body of federal activity constitutes policy, intended to be an active force for good.

This brings us to the question of measuring success. For if the federal government seeks to do good in these arenas, there must be as well a measure of what "good" means. Whether you are a citizen or a policymaker, the same question arises with regard to any particular aspect of social policy: Are you for or against? Let's build more prisons. Yes or no? Let's dispense more food stamps. Yes or no?

For many years—certainly during my own training during the sixties and early seventies—social science faculties in our universities assumed a substratum of truths about why certain policies were good or bad things, and policy analysts did not have to think very hard about why the outcomes we analyzed were good or bad. We knew. Fighting poverty had to be good. Fighting racism had to be good. Fighting inequality had to be good. What other way of looking at good and bad might there be? And what other way of measuring progress might there be except to measure poverty, crime rates, school enrollment, unemployment?

By such measures, however, the policies didn't work out so well. In fact, by most such measures things got worse rather than better, and a fierce debate has raged about whether the policies themselves were at fault (a view that I share) or whether things would have been still worse without them. But even as the debate has continued, it has been increasingly difficult for policy analysts of any persuasion to avoid wondering whether we have been asking the right questions. Are we thinking about "progress" in the right way? *What constitutes "success" in social policy?*

Fighting poverty is good, yes. But if the poverty rate goes down while the proportion of children born to single women goes up, how are those two vectors to be combined so that we know whether, in the aggregate, we are headed up or down, forward or backward? Fighting racial discrimination is good, yes. But if the laws against discrimination in housing are made ever more stringent and actual segregation in housing increases, what are we to make of it? How are we to decide what course to navigate in the future?

Underlying these questions are others that ask not just how we are to add up conflicting indicators but rather the more far-reaching question, What's the point? What is the point of food stamps, anyway? What are they for? Suppose that we passed out food stamps so freely that no young man ever had to worry about whether a child that he caused to be conceived would be fed. *Would that really be a better world for children to be born into?* Or let us take food stamps writ large: Suppose that we made all material goods so freely available that parents could not ever again take satisfaction from the accomplishment of feeding, sheltering, and clothing their children. *Would that really be a better world in which to be a parent?* The immediate "point" of food stamps is simple—trying to help people have enough food to eat. But food stamps serve (and perhaps impede) other ends as well. What's the point? Ultimately, happiness is the point.

"The Pursuit of Happiness"

To make the case for happiness as something that a policy analyst can reasonably think about, there is no better place to start than with

the stately and confident words of the Declaration of Independence. It is worth trying to read them as if for the first time: "We hold these truths to be self evident: that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness—that to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men . . ."

"Happiness" was not Thomas Jefferson's idiosyncratic choice of words, nor was "pursuit of happiness" a rhetorical flourish to round out the clause. For the Founders, "happiness" was the obvious word to use because it was obvious to them that the pursuit of happiness is at the center of man's existence, and that to permit man to pursue happiness is the central justification of government—the "object of government," as James Madison wrote in The Federalist No. 62.[1] James Wilson, who was later to become one of the chief architects of the Constitution, was voicing the general understanding of his contemporaries when he wrote in 1769 that the only reason men consent to have government is ". . . with a view to ensure and to increase the happiness of the governed, above what they could enjoy in an independent and unconnected state of nature," and then went on to assert that "the happiness of the society is the first law of every government."[2] John Adams calmly asserted that "Upon this point all speculative politicians will agree, that the happiness of society is the end of Government, as all divines and moral philosophers will agree that the happiness of the individual is the end of man."[3] Washington took happiness for his theme repeatedly, returning to it for the last time in his Farewell Address.[4] The concept of happiness and the word itself appear again and again in Revolutionary sermons, pamphlets, and tracts.[5]

What may annoy the modern reader approaching these texts is that these eighteenth-century writers never stipulated what they *meant* by happiness. The word appears in a sentence and then the writer or the speaker moves on. It is as if they were addressing people who would of course know what was meant by "happiness"—not only know, but agree. And so they did. They did not necessarily agree on the details. Some took their understanding from Aristotle and Aquinas, others from Locke, others from Burlamaqui or Hutcheson. But educated men were in broad agreement that happiness was a label for

a ubiquitous concept, the concept of the good-that-one-seeks-as-an-end-in-itself-and-for-no-other-reason. The logic behind this concept is simple and highly intuitive, going roughly as follows.

Anything we enjoy—anything that is a "good" in some sense—we enjoy for itself, but we also enjoy it because of other goods to which it leads. I enjoy getting a new car, let us say. Perhaps I enjoy it for the thing-in-itself known as a New Car, but I also obviously value it for other things such as driving places. Or: I value friendship as a good-in-itself. But I also use friendship for other ends besides friendship. Friends may educate me, which is also a good; they may make me laugh, which is also a good; or they may loan me money when I need it, still a third good.

The same applies to political goods. An egalitarian may value equality as a good-in-itself, but he also values it for the other good things that equality facilitates. Ethical goods are subject to the same dualism (justice is a good-in-itself, but it also serves many other purposes).

What the men and women of the eighteenth century took for granted—and I will take for granted in this book—is that the mind must conceive a stopping point to the chain of questions about "What other ends does it serve?": an end at which there is no answer possible, an end that is reached when one is talking about the good-that-one-seeks-as-an-end-in-itself-and-for-no-other-reason. At this stage of the discussion, there is no need for us to try to decide what this ultimate good-in-itself consists of. We need only to agree that the concept of such a self-sufficient end-in-itself exists. To be discussed, it needs a label. That label is happiness.

Happiness and Higher Goals

The use of happiness in this, its ancient and honored meaning, nonetheless continues to sound strange to contemporary ears. "Happiness" has become identified with self-absorption, the goal you seek if you are a young urban professional who doesn't give a damn about anything except your own pleasure. When "happiness" is proposed as the proper goal of life, the nearly reflexive response is that a major *problem* with contemporary America is that too many people are