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Endangered  
Guardian: America's  
Two-Party System  
and Progressive  
Reform

*By Donald V. Weatherman*



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# ENDANGERED GUARDIAN: AMERICA'S TWO-PARTY SYSTEM AND PROGRESSIVE REFORM

Donald V. Weatherman

Both our political parties, at least the honest part of them, agree conscientiously in the same object — the public good; but they differ essentially in what they deem the means of promoting that good. One side believes it best done by one composition of the governing powers; the other, by a different one. One fears most the ignorance of the people; the other, the selfishness of rulers independent of them.

— Thomas Jefferson

As we continue to celebrate the bicentennial of our United States Constitution, it is important that we also consider some of the institutions that developed around that document. The Constitution, as we all know, was intended as a skeleton for our government; in time, certain precedents would develop, either out of necessity or convenience, that would complement our basic constitutional structure. Our enlightened Founders left enough flexibility in their system to permit growth and maturation. A close reading of the notes that were kept during the Constitutional Convention of 1787 makes it glaringly obvious that some issues were intentionally left to be decided by time and circumstances.

## PARTY DEVELOPMENT

The first Congress under our new Constitution addressed a number of these open issues. History books often refer to the first Congress as a second constitutional convention because of its passage of the Bill of Rights, its approval of a number of cabinet positions, and its creation of our basic courts at the district and circuit levels. While the Founders were open to the changes the new political system would require, they were not blind to some of the pitfalls that awaited the young republic. One institutional arrangement they feared and ardently tried to avoid was the development of political parties. Madison's famous *Federalist* #10 warned that "the public good is disregarded in the conflicts of rival parties." Washington spent a good portion of his Farewell Address describing the "baneful effect of parties of a geographical discrimination."

In spite of this opposition, parties did develop early in U.S. history, but respectability did not accompany their acceptance in practice. Opinions often lag behind necessity. The use of political parties on the national scene started during the second Congress; their

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emergence was caused by a number of factors, but most notably by congressional opposition to Alexander Hamilton's financial schemes. James Madison, appropriately, was the organizer and mastermind behind this initial partisan effort. History and political science texts usually consider Thomas Jefferson to be the founder of the first organized opposition, but it would be more accurate to call Jefferson America's first opposition candidate for the presidency.

**Respectability in America.** Jefferson used party machinery to oppose John Adams but this did mean he was a fan of political parties. He continued to oppose political parties in principle, believing that the Republican Party was indeed the party to end all parties.<sup>1</sup> With the Republican victory in 1800 and its subsequent victories, the issue did not seem to be a burning one until the next phase of party development in the late 1820s. The mastermind behind this second stage of development, as Madison before him, was not the person whose name was used to symbolize the movement. Martin Van Buren probably did more for the development of America's two-party system than did any other single person. Van Buren's reformation of the old Virginia-New York coalition not only made Andrew Jackson's second bid for the presidency a successful one, but also gave political parties respectability in America.

What Madison and Van Buren had in common was a keen sense of political timing and a keener sense of the direction of American politics. The presidencies of James Monroe and John Quincy Adams made it very obvious to Van Buren that the choice before America in terms of presidential politics was between a system based on parties and one based on personalities. While the former was far from perfect, it was vastly superior to the latter. Van Buren also believed that the party approach to politics was more compatible with our constitutional system. Parties focus on issues that can be assessed in the light of their constitutionality, whereas personalities do not. In fact, Van Buren, as had Madison, saw party reform as a means to strengthening our constitutional system.

**Masterful Organizer.** Van Buren was a masterful party organizer and most works that deal with his political career stress his genius as a party chieftain; what they usually overlook is his impact on public opinion and, more specifically, the fact that he was largely responsible for making political parties a respectable component of American politics. Van Buren, not Madison, was responsible for America's acceptance of party politics — an acceptance that has led many to argue today that there is something suspicious about any government that claims to be a democracy yet does not have a viable opposition party.

But a curious phenomenon has developed. America's one-time love of political parties has clearly deteriorated. To some extent this has been by design, but not entirely. Much of the destruction of the U.S. party system has come at the hands of people who claim allegiance to it. It is almost as if we have reversed the rhetoric and practice of two hundred years ago. Jefferson was attacking parties while he was actively building one; today we find many who praise our party system at the very time they are dismantling it.

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1 For a detailed discussion of this point, see my essay titled "From Factions to Parties: America's Partisan Education," in Thomas Silver and Peter Schramm, eds., *Natural Right and Political Right: Essays in Honor of Harry V. Jaffa* (Durham, N. C.: Carolina Academic Press, 1984).

## PARTY DISMANTLEMENT

A clear understanding of the dismantlers and dismantling requires that we look at the history of party reform efforts over the past century. The three major party reform efforts since the turn of the 20th century have been championed by the progressive reformers (the anti-party reformers), the "responsible" reformers (the constitutional party reformers), and the commission reformers (the feudal party reformers). Each of these reform movements has grown out of a different set of circumstances, each has approached reform in a slightly different way, but in the final analysis, each has proved very detrimental to our two-party system and to the Constitution our party system was originally set up to protect.

The first of these reforms was an overt attack on the existing national parties. This attack received its clearest and most complete expression in the pages of *The New Republic* and in the Progressive Party's critique of the Republican and Democratic Parties. Many Progressives did not abandon the established parties and worked for reform from within those organizations. The second wave of reforms was packaged as a nonpartisan effort. The high point of this effort, if there was one, was the publication by the Committee on Political Parties of the American Political Science Association of *Toward a More Responsible Two-Party System*. A lengthy debate ensued, largely among academics, and then the issue seemed to die out until its revival by a group calling itself The Committee on the Constitutional System. The third wave of reforms has been focused primarily within the Democratic Party. The McGovern-Fraser Commission of 1968 was the first in what has appeared to be an unending series of commissions set up to restructure the delegate selection process for the Democratic Party presidential nominating conventions.

**Common Thread.** As one might guess, reforms in one party have a ripple effect on the other, so some of the Democratic Party's reforms have altered the rules of the party nomination game for both parties. At first glance, these reforms do not appear to be as hazardous for the Republicans as they have been for the Democrats. But the jury is still out. In the long run it is hard to imagine that the weakening of either party is to the advantage of the overall system.

Despite their differences on the surface, I believe there is a common thread connecting all three of these reform efforts: the abandonment of our constitutional system of checks and balances. The rhetoric of reform wants us to believe that the passage of time, the growth of our nation, industrial expansion, or modern technology has made our old constitutional system obsolete — that further democratization requires that we free ourselves from the shackles of this 18th century document. But common sense and hindsight make it clear that all of these 20th century reformers have lacked the very qualities that made our Founding Fathers' work timeless: an understanding of human nature and an appreciation for the limits of government. Both of these helped the Founders see the need for checks and balances.

## THE ANTI-PARTY REFORMERS

Of the three reform groups I have cited, the Progressives were clearly the most ambitious and the most hostile toward political parties, and they will be the focus of my comments today. Progressives desired sweeping reforms in American society, and while their means were largely political, their ends were social and economic. The political system they inherited from the Founders was too limited for their purposes. Theodore Roosevelt captured this feeling when he described the Progressive Movement as "the intelligent expression of a popular protest; it is the instrument of the people's aspiration for a larger economic, social and political life; it is the acknowledgment that our progress has been unequal from the ethical, political and industrial standpoints, so that our governmental clothes need to be changed and enlarged to fit our increased bodily growth, our increasing and changing economic needs."<sup>2</sup>

The two obstacles that stood in the way of changing and enlarging our "governmental clothes," at the national level, were the U.S. Constitution and the two-party system. Despite the efforts of scholars like Charles Beard and J. Allen Smith, the Constitution continued to be greatly revered by most Americans, leaving political parties to receive the brunt of the Progressives' attack.

**Wrong on Fundamental Points.** Political parties were not the focus of reform simply because they were the easier prey. Another belief that existed at the turn of the century, and is common among some reformers yet today, was that political parties, in an important sense, replaced the constitutional system of 1787. Perpetuating such a myth serves reformers in two ways. First, their attack on political parties can be presented as a way of returning to the Founders' faith. Second, if parties have already replaced the Founders' system, what the Progressives are advocating is no more radical than what occurred during the Jacksonian era. *The New Republic* described this political transformation in the following way:

The two parties really became the government because they constituted the only effective organization of the electorate for the accomplishment of political purposes. But they formed an unofficial and irresponsible government which gradually ceased to be popular, and which made all movements pay tribute to the idols of Democracy and Republicanism and their priests.<sup>3</sup>

This assertion is wrong on two fundamental points. First, political parties never became the government. They recruited personnel for the government, and they worked hard at trying to influence the government, but they were not the government. Failure to see this is the result of many Progressives' inability to distinguish between government and politics. It

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<sup>2</sup> Samuel Duncan-Clark, *The Progressive Movement: Its Principles and Its Programme* (Boston: Small, Maynard & Co., 1913), p. XIV.

<sup>3</sup> August 21, 1915, p. 60.

should be noted that what the Progressives were describing is precisely what the next set of party reformers are prescribing. Second, the Progressives' faith that the two major political parties had "ceased to be popular" has been proved wrong by the march of time. Both the Democratic and Republican Parties, though weakened and battered, are still with us today.

**Preservers of Privilege.** There was not unanimous consent among the Progressives as to what specific reforms were needed but, generally, they called for presidential primaries; greater use of initiative, referendum, and recall; and the direct election of U.S. Senators. These proposals may not seem terribly radical to us today, in part because of the extent of the Progressives' success in implementing their program. What is important to keep in mind is the extent to which these proposals weakened our party system. Let us look at presidential primaries and why this was one of the key reforms of the era.

Progressives disliked political parties for many reasons, but the one most often cited was that parties were preservers of privilege. The greatest symbol of party privilege was believed to be the party convention. Students of American history know that party conventions were created, at the national level, to replace old "King Caucus." But Progressives felt that party conventions were every bit as corrupt and undemocratic as the caucuses had been.

The convention system was based upon the theory that there is superior wisdom in delegated assemblies. That theory no longer applies to politics, and the system itself has become the convenient tool of bosses, machines and special interests. Committees on credentials and resolutions do most of the work in conventions; a compact organization, with a chairman trained in tactics and indifferent to criticism or protest, can turn a convention into a body of subservient puppets, or can create a majority where none existed, that will run rough-shod over the will of the people. The term 'steam-roller' grew out of the convention system as a picturesque description of the ruthless methods employed by bosses and machines.<sup>4</sup>

**Party to End All Parties.** The Progressives' solution to this problem was the solution they posed for most problems in American society — greater democracy. As Samuel Duncan-Clark explained in his book, *The Progressive Movement*:

The direct primary places in the hands of the people the right and the power to name their candidates for office. It greatly lessens the peril

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4 *The Progressive Movement, op. cit.*, pp. 56-57.

of boss rule and strikes a crushing blow at the alliance between professional politics and privilege.<sup>5</sup>

Theodore Roosevelt probably summed up the Progressive mood best when he stated, "The power of the people must be made supreme within the several party organizations."<sup>6</sup>

The Progressive scheme called for a fairly direct link between the voting public and their elected representatives (mainly administrative officers). The closer that tie, the less need there would be for political parties. Roosevelt seemed to envision the Progressive Party as permanently what Jefferson's Republican Party had been temporarily: becoming the party to end all parties. This was possible because, according to most Progressive literature, the goal of the enlightenment had finally been fulfilled. Duncan-Clark captured this article of faith when he proclaimed:

Today knowledge is widely diffused. Schools, colleges and universities have raised the average of intelligence. Fast mail, telegraphs and telephones link every corner of the country and narrow the world to small compass. Thousands of newspapers keep the people informed; scores of magazines carry on an invaluable work of education. Free libraries, chautauquas and innumerable organizations devoted to the discussion of social, economic and political questions provoke study and reflection.<sup>7</sup>

**"New Nationalism."** The kind of public leadership political parties had performed had been obviated by mass education and rapid communication. What had actually happened was that mass communication and rapid transportation had, once again, strengthened the ability of individuals to make direct appeals to the public. As had happened in the 1820s, the U.S. was once again faced with the alternative between a system dominated by party leadership and one dominated by personal leadership. Roosevelt's vision of the alternative is ably described in his "New Nationalism" speech:

The leader holds his position, purely because he is able to appeal to the conscience and to the reason of those who support him, and the boss holds his position because he appeals to fear of punishment and hope of reward. The leader works in the open, the boss in covert. The leader leads, and the boss drives.

But these were not the only options available. In addition to the independent political leader he describes, there were party leaders, whose appeal was to more than the national conscience, and at the same time were not the entrenched bosses, whose appeal was

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5 *Ibid.*, pp. 57-58.

6 "Purpose and Policies of the Progressive Party," speech delivered before the Progressive Convention, August 6, 1912.

7 *The Progressive Movement, op. cit.*, p. 47.



primarily monetary. Progressives were almost unanimous in their praise of Jefferson and Lincoln, two of America's premier party leaders.

**America's Central Idea.** In the preface to Duncan-Clark's book on the Progressive movement, Roosevelt criticizes the Republican Party for abandoning the original principles of Lincoln and the Democratic Party and for losing sight of Jefferson's original intentions. The Progressives' reverence for Lincoln and Jefferson as America's most inspirational statesmen was well placed. Their greatness, however, was not due exclusively to their philosophical genius or their rhetorical gifts. Their philosophical understanding of the "central idea" of American society — the notion that "all men are created equal" — was in need of an institutional anchor, and they both recognized party machinery as the best institution to provide that anchor. Roosevelt's scheme sounds too much like some Weberian plan for institutionalizing charisma. Appealing to the conscience of a people, as Roosevelt suggested, can be done by a Hitler as easily as a Lincoln.

Maintaining the "central idea" of this or any other regime requires a system that accommodates the ambition of "the family of lions, or the tribe of the eagle," to use Lincoln's terminology, but at the same time forces those ambitions to perpetuate the "central idea." As long as political parties are the vehicles through which those ambitions are channeled, the principles that guided the party in past generations will impose limits on the passions of future generations. Lincoln succeeded because he refrained from appealing to the conscience of the people as the abolitionists did; instead, he chose the safer and nobler ground of the Founders' faith — a faith that may have been less pure, in the abstract theoretical sense, but one that was politically consistent with both the means and the ends employed by the Founders. For this reason, Lincoln's ambition — as Jefferson's before him — was tempered by the desire to perpetuate U.S. political institutions. This was the message of Lincoln's speech to the Young Mens' Lyceum in 1838, a message all 20th century party reformers have failed to understand.

The Progressives broke from the faith of both Jefferson and Lincoln in a more radical way than had either of the two major parties. Unlike their predecessors from the Era of Good Feeling, the Progressives knew that party leadership had historic ties to the existing constitutional system. A major appeal of personal leadership was that it permitted greater freedom from constitutional restraints, freedom that would ultimately permit the growth of executive power and the weakening of the archaic system of checks and balances. If the Progressive reforms succeeded, the immediate losers would be the legislatures and the established political parties.

## **PROGRESSIVE LEADERSHIP**

Whatever differences may have existed between Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson, the two men were in theoretical agreement on the leadership question. Wilson's *The Study of Public Administration* presents a commonly held Progressive view on America's political development. With the Civil War, the U.S. had settled its last real political dispute. All that was left for Americans to do was to clean up the machinery of government. This was primarily an administrative task and was also why executives were becoming administrative officers.

In the eyes of the Progressives, government had moved from the realm of the political to the realm of the technical. Party functionaries were no longer needed; bureaucrats were. *The New Republic* captured this opinion in a 1914 essay titled "The Future of the Two-Party System:"

The American democracy will not continue to need the two-party system to intermediate between the popular will and the governmental machinery. By means of executive leadership, expert administrative independence and direct legislation, it will gradually create a new governmental machinery which will be born with the impulse to destroy the two-party system, and will itself be thoroughly and flexibly representative of the underlying purposes and needs of a more social democracy.<sup>8</sup>

**Direct Assault on the Constitution.** Notice how cleverly this is phrased: "a new governmental machinery" based on "executive leadership, expert administrative independence and direct legislation," all of which, they believed, would obviate our two-party system. But the two-party system was not all that was being threatened. This new governmental machinery was a direct assault on our constitutional system as well.

The passage of the Pendleton Act in 1883 was one small step for bureaucratic reform, one giant step for our new governmental system. David Thelen captured one aspect of this new attitude when he explained:

To create a political system based on merit, these reformers constantly contrasted the successful businessman with the successful politician. Measuring political performance against the yardstick of the businessman, these reformers concluded that partisanship was the basic problem of politics. The political system encouraged only the value of party loyalty, whereas the competitive world of business bred for talent, integrity, intelligence, and experience. In contrast to businessmen who always had to reduce labor costs to remain competitive, politicians seemed ever eager to create unnecessary jobs — at great expense to taxpayers — to have places for the party's election workers. Since party loyalty was the only prerequisite for public employment, patronage appointees were generally incompetent and frequently corrupt, the reformer reasoned.<sup>9</sup>

Corruption, however, was just the tip of the reformers' iceberg.

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8 *Ibid.*, p. 11.

9 "Two Traditions of Progressive Reform, Political Parties and American Democracy" in Patricia Bonomi *et al.*, eds., *The American Constitutional System Under Strong and Weak Parties* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1981) p. 41.

**From Party Politics to Bureaucratic Politics.** The shift away from party politics to bureaucratic politics — a term the reformers would not use — did not make government more efficient. With hindsight it is fairly clear that it had the opposite effect. The belief that government can function like a private business ignores the role competition plays in the marketplace. It also assumes that once bureaucratic agencies are in place that they will be above politics. One of the actual results of the movement away from party politics toward bureaucratic politics has been to change the location of the political battles. Under party politics most political battles are fought among the electorate; under bureaucratic politics these battles are fought in Congress or between Congress and the President.

This means that one of the main accomplishments of greater bureaucratization was (and is) that the public has become a little more isolated from political battles. This was not entirely by accident, but it does raise some serious questions about Progressives' appeals to and faith in the masses. David Thelen argues that Progressive reforms "pointed in two very different directions: one toward democracy and another toward bureaucracy."<sup>10</sup> None of the leading Progressive thinkers considered these to be conflicting impulses. According to Roosevelt, Wilson, Croly, and other leading Progressive thinkers, the most immediate problem of American politics was corruption. And, on their horizon, democracy and bureaucracy were the quickest and best solution to this problem. As we have already seen, democracy was perceived as the solution to corruption in the presidential nominating process. Bureaucratization would remove the patronage positions that institutionalized that corruption. Both of these moves were correctly perceived as attacks on the existing two-party system.

**Worse than the Disease.** American politics had become fairly corrupt by the end of the 19th century, and the U.S. two-party system was infected by this corruption. Yet the Progressive solution, to borrow a phrase from Madison, was a "remedy that was worse than the disease." The reformers, as they are described by Thelen, were wrong to assume that "partisanship was the basic problem of politics." If the problem was corruption and inefficiency, the two political parties were, as they had always been in American politics, a reflection of the larger system of which they were a part. Corruption was not a uniquely partisan phenomenon; corruption, as the reformers pointed out again and again, was as much a problem in business as it was in government. If it was not, then why were there so many complaints about the trusts, the railroads, and American industry at large? Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* was no less damning of U.S. industry than the muckrakers had been of U.S. politics.

There were problems in America, but political parties were not the cause, they were one of the victims. The reason reformers were so eager to accuse parties and to attack them was that the Progressive movement was, in the main, a movement of the educated upper-middle and upper classes. What these people disliked about political parties was their inability to control them. The urban machines were usually controlled by the ethnic groups that dominated the inner cities, and the national parties were usually controlled by an alliance

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<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 37.

between these urban (or, in some cases, state) machines and the heads of American industry. Neither of these groups had close ties to America's newly emerging educated professionals.<sup>11</sup>

By making American government more bureaucratic and technical, these educated professionals, as students of scientific management and technology, would bring the government closer to themselves. This was clearly a political move that did not, as its advocates claimed, depoliticize government, but simply altered the rules of the political game. There is no such thing as a politically neutral reform.

Not all reformers recognized this shift of power as a political ploy. Many of the reformers accepted the rhetoric of the movement at face value. It was hard to see that, by shifting the focus of American politics from the local party caucus or precinct meeting to some administrative office at the county or national seat of government, they were eroding the very fabric of our constitutional system. The twofold impact of this shift was to make the American political system considerably less democratic and profoundly more unitary. To put it another way, it made the U.S. political system much more like the one considered so obnoxious in 1776.

## CONCLUSION

Let me conclude with the moral to this story. The Progressive movement failed because it never came to terms with the relationship between its means and its ends. The Progressive movement was obsessed with its social ends, and careful thought was not given to the means to achieving those ends. Progressives spoke eloquently about democracy and justice, and I do not doubt the sincerity of their commitment to these principles. However, their extreme desire for democratic results made them too impatient to calculate carefully the appropriate means to achieve the desired results.

Earlier I mentioned David Thelen's assertion that the Progressive movement pointed in two different directions: democracy and bureaucracy. Progressives saw these as a two-pronged attack on a single problem. The ideal end of Progressive democracy was social justice, the minimal end of Progressive bureaucracy was social control. Although democracy and bureaucracy may be of questionable compatibility as means, Progressives believed that the ends they would produce were quite compatible.

**Obsessed with Democratic Procedures.** All the party reformers of this century have made a similar error. The responsible party reformers, as their predecessors, were (and are) obsessed with ends, whereas the commission reformers err in the opposite direction. Edward Banfield claimed that the commission reformers were so obsessed with democratic procedures or means that they completely ignored the results these procedures would produce. If the presidential elections since 1968 are any indication, U.S. voters seem to agree with that assessment.

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11 John Chamberlain, *Farewell to Reform: The Rise, Life and Decay of the Progressive Mind in America* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1932, 1965), p. 155.

One of the great strengths of the Founders was their careful consideration of both means and ends. The Declaration of Independence and the Preamble to the U.S. Constitution establish the highest ends possible for government; the rest of the Constitution and the two-party system provide the best means we know for achieving those ends. Reforms may be necessary from time to time, but the most successful reforms have always been those that move us closer to the ideals set forth by our Founders, not those that claim to transcend them. Political parties may not have been endorsed by the Founders, but they have done an excellent job of preserving the principles and institutions that were.

Since I opened this presentation with a quotation from Jefferson, it seems fitting to close with one from Lincoln: "The people — the people — are the rightful masters of congresses, and courts — not to overthrow the constitution, but to overthrow the *men* who pervert it."<sup>12</sup>



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<sup>12</sup> *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, Vol. III, edited by Roy P. Basler (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1953), p. 455.