

The Progressive Movement and the Transformation of American Politics

Remarks by Thomas G. West and Commentary by William A. Schambra

Progressivism was the reform movement that ran from the late 19th century through the first decades of the 20th century, during which leading intellectuals and social reformers in the United States sought to address the economic, political, and cultural questions that had arisen in the context of the rapid changes brought with the Industrial Revolution and the growth of modern capitalism in America. The Progressives believed that these changes marked the end of the old order and required the creation of a new order appropriate for the new industrial age.

There are, of course, many different representations of Progressivism: the literature of Upton Sinclair, the architecture of Frank Lloyd Wright, the history of Charles Beard, the educational system of John Dewey. In politics and political thought, the movement is associated with political leaders such as Woodrow Wilson and Theodore Roosevelt and thinkers such as Herbert Croly and Charles Merriam.

While the Progressives differed in their assessment of the problems and how to resolve them, they generally shared in common the view that government at every level must be actively involved in these reforms. The existing constitutional system was outdated and must be made into a dynamic, evolving instrument of social change, aided by scientific knowledge and the development of administrative bureaucracy.

At the same time, the old system was to be opened up and made more democratic; hence, the direct elections of

Senators, the open primary, the initiative and referendum. It also had to be made to provide for more revenue; hence, the Sixteenth Amendment and the progressive income tax.

Presidential leadership would provide the unity of direction—the vision—needed for true progressive government. “All that progressives ask or desire,” wrote Woodrow Wilson, “is permission—in an era when development, evolution, is a scientific word—to interpret the Constitution according to the Darwinian principle; all they ask is recognition of the fact that a nation is a living thing and not a machine.”

*What follows is a discussion about the effect that Progressivism has had—and continues to have—on American politics and political thought. The remarks stem from the publication of *The Progressive Revolution in Politics and Political Science* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), to which Dr. West contributed.*

REMARKS BY THOMAS G. WEST

The thesis of our book, *The Progressive Revolution in Politics and Political Science*, is that Progressivism transformed American politics. What was that transformation? It was a total rejection in theory, and a partial rejection in practice, of the principles and policies on which America had been founded and on the basis of which the Civil War had been fought and won only a few years earlier. When I speak of Progressivism, I

mean the movement that rose to prominence between about 1880 and 1920.

In a moment I will turn to the content of the Progressive conception of politics and to the contrast between that approach and the tradition, stemming from the founding, that it aimed to replace. But I would like first to emphasize how different is the assessment of Progressivism presented in our book, *The Progressive Revolution*, from the understanding that prevails among most scholars. It is not much of an exaggeration to say that few scholars, especially among students of American political thought, regard the Progressive Era as having any lasting significance in American history. In my own college and graduate student years, I cannot recall any of the famous teachers with whom I studied saying anything much about it. Among my teachers were some very impressive men: Walter Berns, Allan Bloom, Harry Jaffa, Martin Diamond, Harry Neumann, and Leo Strauss.

Today, those who speak of the formative influences that made America what it is today tend to endorse one of three main explanations. Some emphasize material factors such as the closing of the frontier, the Industrial Revolution, the rise of the modern corporation, and accidental emergencies such as wars or the Great Depression, which in turn led to the rise of the modern administrative state.

Second is the rational choice explanation. Morris Fiorina and others argue that once government gets involved in providing extensive services for the public, politicians see that growth in government programs enables them to win elections. The more government does, the easier it is for Congressmen to do favors for voters and donors.

Third, still other scholars believe that the ideas of the American founding itself are responsible for current developments. Among conservatives, Robert Bork's *Slouching Toward Gomorrah* adopts the gloomy view that the Founders' devotion to the principles of liberty and equality led inexorably to the excesses of today's welfare state and cultural decay. Allan Bloom's best-selling *The Closing of the American Mind* presents a

more sophisticated version of Bork's argument. Liberals like Gordon Wood agree, but they think that the change in question is good, not bad. Wood writes that although the Founders themselves did not understand the implications of the ideas of the Revolution, those ideas eventually "made possible...all our current egalitarian thinking."

My own view is this: Although the first two of the three mentioned causes (material circumstances and politicians' self-interest) certainly played a part, the most important cause was a change in the prevailing understanding of justice among leading American intellectuals and, to a lesser extent, in the American people. Today's liberalism and the policies that it has generated arose from a conscious repudiation of the principles of the American founding.

If the contributors to *The Progressive Revolution* are right, Bork and Bloom are entirely wrong in their claim that contemporary liberalism is a logical outgrowth of the principles of the founding. During the Progressive Era, a new theory of justice took hold. Its power has been so great that Progressivism, as modified by later developments within contemporary liberalism, has become the predominant view in modern American education, media, popular culture, and politics. Today, people who call themselves conservatives and liberals alike accept much of the Progressive view of the world. Although few outside of the academy openly attack the Founders, I know of no prominent politician, and only the tiniest minority of scholars, who altogether support the Founders' principles.

THE PROGRESSIVE REJECTION OF THE FOUNDING

Shortly after the end of the Civil War, a large majority of Americans shared a set of beliefs concerning the purpose of government, its structure, and its most important public policies. Constitutional amendments were passed abolishing slavery and giving the national government the authority to protect the basic civil rights of everyone. Here was a legal foundation on which the promise of the American Revolution could

be realized in the South, beyond its already existing implementation in the Northern and Western states.

This post-Civil War consensus was animated by the principles of the American founding. I will mention several characteristic features of that approach to government and contrast them with the new, Progressive approach. Between about 1880 and 1920, the earlier orientation gradually began to be replaced by the new one. In the New Deal period of the 1930s, and later even more decisively in the 1960s and '70s, the Progressive view, increasingly radicalized by its transformation into contemporary liberalism, became predominant.

1. The Rejection of Nature and the Turn to History

The Founders believed that all men are created equal and that they have certain inalienable rights. All are also obliged to obey the natural law, under which we have not only rights but duties. We are obliged “to respect those rights in others which we value in ourselves” (Jefferson). The main rights were thought to be life and liberty, including the liberty to organize one’s own church, to associate at work or at home with whomever one pleases, and to use one’s talents to acquire and keep property. For the Founders, then, there is a natural moral order—rules discovered by human reason that promote human well-being, rules that can and should guide human life and politics.

The Progressives rejected these claims as naive and unhistorical. In their view, human beings are not born free. John Dewey, the most thoughtful of the Progressives, wrote that freedom is not “something that individuals have as a ready-made possession.” It is “something to be achieved.” In this view, freedom is not a gift of God or nature. It is a product of human making, a gift of the state. Man is a product of his own history, through which he collectively creates himself. He is a social construct. Since human beings are not naturally free, there can be no natural rights or natural law. Therefore, Dewey also writes, “Natural rights and natural liberties exist only in the kingdom of mythological social zoology.”

Since the Progressives held that nature gives man little or nothing and that everything of value to human life is made by man, they concluded that there are no permanent standards of right. Dewey spoke of “historical relativity.” However, in one sense, the Progressives did believe that human beings are oriented toward freedom, not by nature (which, as the merely primitive, contains nothing human), but by the historical process, which has the character of progressing toward increasing freedom. So the “relativity” in question means that in all times, people have views of right and wrong that are tied to their particular times, but in our time, the views of the most enlightened are true because they are in conformity with where history is going.

2. The Purpose of Government

For the Founders, thinking about government began with the recognition that what man is given by nature—his capacity for reason and the moral law discovered by reason—is, in the most important respect, more valuable than anything government can give him. Not that nature provides him with his needs. In fact, the Founders thought that civilization is indispensable for human well-being. Although government can be a threat to liberty, government is also necessary for the security of liberty. As Madison wrote, “If men were angels, no government would be necessary.” But since men are not angels, without government, human beings would live in “a state of nature, where the weaker individual is not secured against the violence of the stronger.” In the Founders’ view, nature does give human beings the most valuable things: their bodies and minds. These are the basis of their talents, which they achieve by cultivating these natural gifts but which would be impossible without those gifts.

For the Founders, then, the individual’s existence and freedom in this crucial respect are not a gift of government. They are a gift of God and nature. Government is therefore always and fundamentally in the service of the individual, not the other way around. The purpose of government, then, is to enforce the nat-

ural law for the members of the political community by securing the people's natural rights. It does so by preserving their lives and liberties against the violence of others. In the founding, the liberty to be secured by government is not freedom from necessity or poverty. It is freedom from the despotic and predatory domination of some human beings over others.

Government's main duty for the Founders is to secure that freedom—at home through the making and enforcement of criminal and civil law, abroad through a strong national defense. The protection of life and liberty is achieved through vigorous prosecutions of crime against person and property or through civil suits for recovery of damages, these cases being decided by a jury of one's peers.

The Progressives regarded the Founders' scheme as defective because it took too benign a view of nature. As Dewey remarked, they thought that the individual was ready-made by nature. The Founders' supposed failure to recognize the crucial role of society led the Progressives to disparage the Founders' insistence on limited government. The Progressive goal of politics is freedom, now understood as freedom from the limits imposed by nature and necessity. They rejected the Founders' conception of freedom as useful for self-preservation for the sake of the individual pursuit of happiness. For the Progressives, freedom is redefined as the fulfillment of human capacities, which becomes the primary task of the state.

To this end, Dewey writes, "the state has the responsibility for creating institutions under which individuals can effectively realize the potentialities that are theirs." So although "it is true that social arrangements, laws, institutions are made for man, rather than that man is made for them," these laws and institutions "are not means for obtaining something for individuals, not even happiness. They are means of *creating* individuals.... Individuality in a social and moral sense is something to be wrought out." "Creating individuals" versus "protecting individuals": this sums up the difference between the Founders' and the Progressives' conception of what government is for.

3. The Progressives' Rejection of Consent and Compact as the Basis of Society

In accordance with their conviction that all human beings are by nature free, the Founders taught that political society is "formed by a voluntary association of individuals: It is a social compact, by which the whole people covenants with each citizen, and each citizen with the whole people, that all shall be governed by certain laws for the common good" (Massachusetts Constitution of 1780).

For the Founders, the consent principle extended beyond the founding of society into its ordinary operation. Government was to be conducted under laws, and laws were to be made by locally elected officials, accountable through frequent elections to those who chose them. The people would be directly involved in governing through their participation in juries selected by lot.

The Progressives treated the social compact idea with scorn. Charles Merriam, a leading Progressive political scientist, wrote:

The individualistic ideas of the "natural right" school of political theory, indorsed in the Revolution, are discredited and repudiated.... The origin of the state is regarded, not as the result of a deliberate agreement among men, but as the result of historical development, instinctive rather than conscious; and rights are considered to have their source not in nature, but in law.

For the Progressives, then, it was of no great importance whether or not government begins in consent as long as it serves its proper end of remolding man in such a way as to bring out his real capacities and aspirations. As Merriam wrote, "it was the idea of the state that supplanted the social contract as the ground of political right." Democracy and consent are not absolutely rejected by the Progressives, but their importance is greatly diminished, as we will see when we come to the Progressive conception of governmental structure.

4. God and Religion

In the founding, God was conceived in one of two ways. Christians and Jews believed in the God of the Bible as the author of liberty but also as the author of the moral law by which human beings are guided toward their duties and, ultimately, toward their happiness. Nonbelievers (Washington called them “mere politicians” in his Farewell Address) thought of God merely as a creative principle or force behind the natural order of things.

Both sides agreed that there is a God of nature who endows men with natural rights and assigns them duties under the law of nature. Believers added that the God of nature is also the God of the Bible, while secular thinkers denied that God was anything more than the God of nature. Everyone saw liberty as a “sacred cause.”

At least some of the Progressives redefined God as human freedom achieved through the right political organization. Or else God was simply rejected as a myth. For Hegel, whose philosophy strongly influenced the Progressives, “the state is the divine idea as it exists on earth.” John Burgess, a prominent Progressive political scientist, wrote that the purpose of the state is the “perfection of humanity, the civilization of the world; the perfect development of the human reason and its attainment to universal command over individualism; the *apotheosis of man*” (man becoming God). Progressive-Era theologians like Walter Rauschenbusch redefined Christianity as the social gospel of progress.

5. Limits on Government and the Integrity of the Private Sphere

For the Founders, the purpose of government is to protect the private sphere, which they regarded as the proper home of both the high and the low, of the important and the merely urgent, of God, religion, and science, as well as providing for the needs of the body. The experience of religious persecution had convinced the Founders that government was incompetent at directing man in his highest endeavors. The requirements of liberty, they thought, meant that self-

interested private associations had to be permitted, not because they are good in themselves, but because depriving individuals of freedom of association would deny the liberty that is necessary for the health of society and the flourishing of the individual.

For the Founders, although government was grounded in divine law (i.e., the laws of nature and of nature’s God), government was seen as a merely human thing, bound up with all the strengths and weaknesses of human nature. Government had to be limited both because it was dangerous if it got too powerful and because it was not supposed to provide for the highest things in life.

Because of the Progressives’ tendency to view the state as divine and the natural as low, they no longer looked upon the private sphere as that which was to be protected by government. Instead, the realm of the private was seen as the realm of selfishness and oppression. Private property was especially singled out for criticism. Some Progressives openly or covertly spoke of themselves as socialists.

Woodrow Wilson did so in an unpublished writing. A society like the Founders’ that limits itself to protecting life, liberty, and property was one in which, as Wilson wrote with only slight exaggeration, “all that government had to do was to put on a policeman’s uniform and say, ‘Now don’t anybody hurt anybody else.’” Wilson thought that such a society was unable to deal with the conditions of modern times.

Wilson rejected the earlier view that “the ideal of government was for every man to be left alone and not interfered with, except when he interfered with somebody else; and that the best government was the government that did as little governing as possible.” A government of this kind is unjust because it leaves men at the mercy of predatory corporations. Without government management of those corporations, Wilson thought, the poor would be destined to indefinite victimization by the wealthy. Previous limits on government power must be abolished. Accordingly, Progressive political scientist Theodore Woolsey wrote, “The sphere of the state may reach as far as the nature

and needs of man and of men reach, including intellectual and aesthetic wants of the individual, and the religious and moral nature of its citizens.”

However, this transformation is still in the future, for Progress takes place through historical development. A sign of the Progressives’ unlimited trust in unlimited political authority is Dewey’s remark in his “Ethics of Democracy” that Plato’s *Republic* presents us with the “perfect man in the perfect state.” What Plato’s Socrates had presented as a thought experiment to expose the nature and limits of political life is taken by Dewey to be a laudable obliteration of the private sphere by government mandate. In a remark that the Founders would have found repugnant, Progressive political scientist John Burgess wrote that “the most fundamental and indispensable mark of statehood” was “the original, absolute, unlimited, universal power over the individual subject, and all associations of subjects.”

6. Domestic Policy

For the Founders, domestic policy, as we have seen, concentrated on securing the persons and properties of the people against violence by means of a tough criminal law against murder, rape, robbery, and so on. Further, the civil law had to provide for the poor to have access to acquiring property by allowing the buying and selling of labor and property through voluntary contracts and a legal means of establishing undisputed ownership. The burden of proof was on government if there was to be any limitation on the free use of that property. Thus, licensing and zoning were rare.

Laws regulating sexual conduct aimed at the formation of lasting marriages so that children would be born and provided for by those whose interest and love was most likely to lead to their proper care, with minimal government involvement needed because most families would be intact.

Finally, the Founders tried to promote the moral conditions of an independent, hard-working citizenry by laws and educational institutions that would encourage such virtues as honesty, moderation, justice, patriotism, courage, frugality, and industry. Govern-

ment support of religion (typically generic Protestantism) was generally practiced with a view to these ends. One can see the Founders’ view of the connection between religion and morality in such early laws as the Northwest Ordinance of 1787, which said that government should promote education because “[r]eligion, morality, and knowledge [are] necessary to good government and the happiness of mankind.”

In Progressivism, the domestic policy of government had two main concerns.

First, government must protect the poor and other victims of capitalism through redistribution of resources, anti-trust laws, government control over the details of commerce and production: i.e., dictating at what prices things must be sold, methods of manufacture, government participation in the banking system, and so on.

Second, government must become involved in the “spiritual” development of its citizens—not, of course, through promotion of religion, but through protecting the environment (“conservation”), education (understood as education to personal creativity), and spiritual uplift through subsidy and promotion of the arts and culture.

7. Foreign Policy

For the Founders, foreign and domestic policy were supposed to serve the same end: the security of the people in their person and property. Therefore, foreign policy was conceived primarily as defensive. Foreign attack was to be deterred by having strong arms or repulsed by force. Alliances were to be entered into with the understanding that a self-governing nation must keep itself aloof from the quarrels of other nations, except as needed for national defense. Government had no right to spend the taxes or lives of its own citizens to spread democracy to other nations or to engage in enterprises aiming at imperialistic hegemony.

The Progressives believed that a historical process was leading all mankind to freedom, or at least the advanced nations. Following Hegel, they thought of the march of freedom in history as having a geograph-

ical basis. It was in Europe, not Asia or Africa, where modern science and the modern state had made their greatest advances. The nations where modern science had properly informed the political order were thought to be the proper leaders of the world.

The Progressives also believed that the scientifically educated leaders of the advanced nations (especially America, Britain, and France) should not hesitate to rule the less advanced nations in the interest of ultimately bringing the world into freedom, assuming that supposedly inferior peoples could be brought into the modern world at all. Political scientist Charles Merriam openly called for a policy of colonialism on a racial basis:

[T]he Teutonic races must civilize the politically uncivilized. They must have a colonial policy. Barbaric races, if incapable, may be swept away.... On the same principle, interference with the affairs of states not wholly barbaric, but nevertheless incapable of effecting political organization for themselves, is fully justified.

Progressives therefore embraced a much more active and indeed imperialistic foreign policy than the Founders did. In "Expansion and Peace" (1899), Theodore Roosevelt wrote that the best policy is imperialism on a global scale: "every expansion of a great civilized power means a victory for law, order, and righteousness." Thus, the American occupation of the Philippines, T.R. believed, would enable "one more fair spot of the world's surface" to be "snatched from the forces of darkness. Fundamentally the cause of expansion is the cause of peace."

Woodrow Wilson advocated American entry into World War I, boasting that America's national interest had nothing to do with it. Wilson had no difficulty sending American troops to die in order to make the world safe for democracy, regardless of whether or not it would make America more safe or less. The trend to turn power over to multinational organizations also begins in this period, as may be seen in Wilson's plan

for a League of Nations, under whose rules America would have delegated control over the deployment of its own armed forces to that body.

8. Who Should Rule, Experts or Representatives?

The Founders thought that laws should be made by a body of elected officials with roots in local communities. They should not be "experts," but they should have "most wisdom to discern, and most virtue to pursue, the common good of the society" (Madison). The wisdom in question was the kind on display in *The Federalist*, which relentlessly dissected the political errors of the previous decade in terms accessible to any person of intelligence and common sense.

The Progressives wanted to sweep away what they regarded as this amateurism in politics. They had confidence that modern science had superseded the perspective of the liberally educated statesman. Only those educated in the top universities, preferably in the social sciences, were thought to be capable of governing. Politics was regarded as too complex for common sense to cope with. Government had taken on the vast responsibility not merely of protecting the people against injuries, but of managing the entire economy as well as providing for the people's spiritual well-being. Only government agencies staffed by experts informed by the most advanced modern science could manage tasks previously handled within the private sphere. Government, it was thought, needed to be led by those who see where history is going, who understand the ever-evolving idea of human dignity.

The Progressives did not intend to abolish democracy, to be sure. They wanted the people's will to be more efficiently translated into government policy. But what democracy meant for the Progressives is that the people would take power out of the hands of locally elected officials and political parties and place it instead into the hands of the central government, which would in turn establish administrative agencies run by neutral experts, scientifically trained, to translate the people's inchoate will into concrete policies. Local politicians would be replaced by neu-

tral city managers presiding over technically trained staffs. Politics in the sense of favoritism and self-interest would disappear and be replaced by the universal rule of enlightened bureaucracy.

PROGRESSIVISM AND TODAY'S LIBERALISM

This should be enough to show how radically the Progressives broke with the earlier tradition. Of what relevance is all of this today?

Most obviously, the roots of the liberalism with which we are familiar lie in the Progressive Era. It is not hard to see the connections between the eight features of Progressivism that I have just sketched and later developments. This is true not only for the New Deal period of Franklin Roosevelt, but above all for the major institutional and policy changes that were initiated between 1965 and 1975. Whether one regards the transformation of American politics over the past century as good or bad, the foundations of that transformation were laid in the Progressive Era. Today's liberals, or the teachers of today's liberals, learned to reject the principles of the founding from their teachers, the Progressives.

Nevertheless, in some respects, the Progressives were closer to the founding than they are to today's liberalism. So let us conclude by briefly considering the differences between our current liberalism and Progressivism. We may sum up these differences in three words: science, sex, and progress.

First, in regard to science, today's liberals have a far more ambivalent attitude than the Progressives did. The latter had no doubt that science either had all the answers or was on the road to discovering them. Today, although the prestige of science remains great, it has been greatly diminished by the multicultural perspective that sees science as just another point of view.

Two decades ago, in a widely publicized report of the American Council of Learned Societies, several leading professors in the humanities proclaimed that the "ideal of objectivity and disinterest," which "has been essential to the development of science," has been totally rejected by "the consensus of most of the dominant theories" of today. Instead, today's con-

sensus holds that "all thought does, indeed, develop from particular standpoints, perspectives, interests." So science is just a Western perspective on reality, no more or less valid than the folk magic believed in by an African or Pacific Island tribe that has never been exposed to modern science.

Second, liberalism today has become preoccupied with sex. Sexual activity is to be freed from all traditional restraints. In the Founders' view, sex was something that had to be regulated by government because of its tie to the production and raising of children. Practices such as abortion and homosexual conduct—the choice for which was recently equated by the Supreme Court with the right "to define one's own concept of existence, of meaning, of the universe, and of the mystery of human life"—are considered fundamental rights.

The connection between sexual liberation and Progressivism is indirect, for the Progressives, who tended to follow Hegel in such matters, were rather old-fashioned in this regard. But there was one premise within Progressivism that may be said to have led to the current liberal understanding of sex. That is the disparagement of nature and the celebration of human will, the idea that everything of value in life is created by man's choice, not by nature or necessity.

Once sexual conduct comes under the scrutiny of such a concern, it is not hard to see that limiting sexual expression to marriage—where it is clearly tied to nature's concern for reproduction—could easily be seen as a kind of limitation of human liberty. Once self-realization (Dewey's term, for whom it was still tied to reason and science) is transmuted into self-expression (today's term), all barriers to one's sexual idiosyncrasies must appear arbitrary and tyrannical.

Third, contemporary liberals no longer believe in progress. The Progressives' faith in progress was rooted in their faith in science, as one can see especially in the European thinkers whom they admired, such as Hegel and Comte. When science is seen as just one perspective among many, then progress itself comes into question.

The idea of progress presupposes that the end result is superior to the point of departure, but contemporary liberals are generally wary of expressing any sense of the superiority of the West, whether intellectually, politically, or in any other way. They are therefore disinclined to support any foreign policy venture that contributes to the strength of America or of the West.

Liberal domestic policy follows the same principle. It tends to elevate the “other” to moral superiority over against those whom the Founders would have called the decent and the honorable, the men of wisdom and virtue. The more a person is lacking, the greater is his or her moral claim on society. The deaf, the blind, the disabled, the stupid, the improvident, the ignorant, and even (in a 1984 speech of presidential candidate Walter Mondale) the sad—those who are lowest are extolled as the sacred other.

Surprisingly, although Progressivism, supplemented by the more recent liberalism, has transformed America in some respects, the Founders’ approach to politics is still alive in some areas of American life. One has merely to attend a jury trial over a murder, rape, robbery, or theft in a state court to see the older system of the rule of law at work. Perhaps this is one reason why America seems so conservative to the rest of the Western world. Among ordinary Americans, as opposed to the political, academic, professional, and entertainment elites, there is still a strong attachment to property rights, self-reliance, and heterosexual marriage; a wariness of university-certified “experts”; and an unapologetic willingness to use armed forces in defense of their country.

The first great battle for the American soul was settled in the Civil War. The second battle for America’s soul, initiated over a century ago, is still raging. The choice for the Founders’ constitutionalism or the Progressive-liberal administrative state is yet to be fully resolved.

—Thomas G. West is a Professor of Politics at the University of Dallas, a Director and Senior Fellow of the Claremont Institute, and author of *Vindicating the Founders: Race,*

Sex, Class, and Justice in the Origins of America (Rowman and Littlefield, 1997).

COMMENTARY BY WILLIAM A. SCHAMBRA

Like the volume to which he has contributed, Tom West’s remarks reflect a pessimism about the decisively debilitating effect of Progressivism on American politics. The essayists are insufficiently self-aware—about their own contributions and those of their distinguished teachers. That is, they are not sufficiently aware that they themselves are part of an increasingly vibrant and aggressive movement to recover the Founders’ constitutionalism—a movement that could only have been dreamt of when I entered graduate school in the early ‘70s.

To be sure, the Progressive project accurately described herein did indeed seize and come to control major segments of American cultural and political life. It certainly came to dominate the first modern foundations, the universities, journalism, and most other institutions of American intellectual life. But, as Mr. West suggests, it nonetheless failed in its effort to change entirely the way everyday American political life plays itself out.

As much as the Progressives succeeded in challenging the intellectual underpinnings of the American constitutional system, they nonetheless faced the difficulty that the system itself—the large commercial republic and a separation of powers, reflecting and cultivating individual self-interest and ambition—remained in place. As their early modern designers hoped and predicted, these institutions continued to generate a certain kind of political behavior in accord with presuppositions of the Founders even as Progressive elites continued for the past 100 years to denounce that behavior as self-centered, materialistic, and insufficiently community-minded and public-spirited.

THE PROGRESSIVE FOOTHOLD

The Progressive system managed to gain a foothold in American politics only when it made major compromises with the Founders’ constitutionalism. The best example is the Social Security system: Had the

Progressives managed to install a “pure,” community-minded system, it would have been an altruistic transfer of wealth from the rich to the vulnerable aged in the name of preserving the sense of national oneness or national community. It would have reflected the enduring Progressive conviction that we’re all in this together—all part of one national family, as former New York Governor Mario Cuomo once put it.

Indeed, modern liberals do often defend Social Security in those terms. But in fact, FDR knew the American political system well enough to rely on other than altruistic impulses to preserve Social Security past the New Deal. The fact that it’s based on the myth of individual accounts—the myth that Social Security is only returning to me what I put in—is what has made this part of the 20th century’s liberal project almost completely unassailable politically. As FDR intended, Social Security endures because it draws as much on self-interested individualism as on self-forgetting community-mindedness.

As this illustrates, the New Deal, for all its Progressive roots, is in some sense less purely Progressive than LBJ’s Great Society. In the Great Society, we had more explicit and direct an application of the Progressive commitment to rule by social science experts, largely unmitigated initially by political considerations.

That was precisely Daniel Patrick Moynihan’s insight in *Maximum Feasible Misunderstanding*. Almost overnight, an obscure, untested academic theory about the cause of juvenile delinquency—namely, Richard Cloward and Lloyd Ohlin’s structure of opportunity theory—leapt from the pages of the social science journals into the laws waging a war on poverty.

Indeed, the entire point of the Great Society was to reshape the behavior of the poor—to move them off the welfare rolls by transforming their behavior according to what social sciences had taught us about such undertakings. It was explicitly a project of social engineering in the best Progressive tradition. Sober liberal friends of the Great Society would later admit that a central reason for its failure was precisely the fact that it was an expertise-driven engineering proj-

ect, which had never sought the support or even the acquiescence of popular majorities.

The engineering excesses of the Great Society and the popular reaction against them meant that the 1960s were the beginning of the first serious challenge to the Progressive model for America—a challenge that the New Deal hadn’t precipitated earlier because it had carefully accommodated itself to the Founders’ political system. Certainly the New Left took aim at the Great Society’s distant, inhumane, patronizing, bureaucratic social engineering; but for our purposes, this marked as well the beginning of the modern conservative response to Progressivism, which has subsequently enjoyed some success, occupying the presidency, both houses of Congress, and perhaps soon the Supreme Court.

Curiously, for Mr. West, this is precisely the moment—he settles on the year 1965—at which Progressivism achieves near complete dominance of American politics.

RECOVERING THE FOUNDERS’ CONSTITUTIONALISM

Central to the modern conservative response, I would suggest, is precisely a recovery of the Founders’ constitutionalism—serious attention to the “truth-claims” of the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and *The Federalist Papers*. This had begun in the mid-1950s but really gathered steam in the ‘60s. It was above all a result, as John Marini’s essay in *The Progressive Revolution in Politics and Political Science* suggests, of Leo Strauss’s acknowledgement that the constitutional democracies of the West, no matter how weakened by the internal critique of Progressive elites, had alone managed to resist modern totalitarianism and were worthy of a spirited intellectual defense.

Suddenly, the founding documents, which had long been consigned to the dustbin of history, came once again to be studied seriously, not as reflection of some passing historical moment of the late 18th century, but rather as potential sources of truth about politics, government, and human nature. Harry Jaffa, Herbert Storing, Martin Diamond, Harry Clor, Allan

Bloom, Irving Kristol, and so forth all devoted at least some of their efforts to serious study of the Founders' thought—a process that the volume before us continues.

I would argue that linking the conservative resurgence to a recovery of the Constitution was in fact a critical part of its ability to flourish in a way that conservatism had not otherwise managed earlier in the 20th century.

- Attention to constitutionalism sustained conservatism's appreciation for the central place of individual liberty in American political life, but now tempered by other principles that prevent it from flying off to the extremes of libertarianism, with its rather abstract theoretical commitment to individual liberty to the exclusion of all else.
- The constitutional idea of equality helped us resist the liberal shift from equality of opportunity to equality of results, but it also severed the new conservatism from past versions of itself which had unhappily emphasized class, status, and hierarchy— notions which had never taken hold in America.
- Attention to the concept of the commercial republic shored up the idea of free markets but without relapsing into a simplistic worship of the marketplace, given Hamilton's view of the need for an active federal government in creating and preserving a large national common market.
- Speaking of Hamilton, his essays in *The Federalist* suggesting the need for a powerful executive branch that would lead America into a position of international prominence sustained conservatism's new understanding of America's role in the world, severing it from the isolationism that had previously marred conservative doctrine.
- Finally, a recovery of the Constitution's concept of decentralist federalism informed conservatism's defense of family, neighborhood, local community, and local house of worship; that is, it gave us a way to defend local community against

Progressivism's doctrine of national community but within a strong national framework, without falling into anarchic doctrines of "township sovereignty" or concurrent majorities.

In other words, to some degree, modern conservatism owes its success to a recovery of and an effort to root itself in the Founders' constitutionalism. Frank Meyer was famous for his doctrine of fusionism—a fusing of libertarian individualism with religious traditionalism. The real fusionism for contemporary conservatism, I would suggest, is supplied by its effort to recover the Founders' constitutionalism, which was itself an effort to fuse or blend critical American political principles like liberty and equality, competent governance and majority rule.

As noted, the Founders' constitutionalism had continued to shape American politics and public opinion in a subterranean fashion throughout the 20th century out of sight of, and in defiance of, the intellectual doctrines and utopian expectations of American Progressive intellectuals. Modern conservatism "re-theorizes," so to speak, the constitutional substructure and creates a political movement that, unlike Progressivism, is sailing with rather than against the prevailing winds of American political life. That surely makes for smoother sailing.

Mr. West and his co-authors are all children of this conservative resurgence and are themselves obviously hoping to link it to a recovery of constitutionalism. So perhaps it is just modesty that leads them to profess that their efforts and those of their teachers have come to naught and to insist that Progressivism has succeeded in destroying America after all.

THE EARLY CONSTITUTIONALISTS

This volume's pessimism also neglects the critical moment in American history which provided the indispensable basis for today's effort to recover the Founders' constitutionalism. As you may know, in the Republican primaries of 1912, Theodore Roosevelt campaigned for the presidency on a platform of radi-

cal constitutional reform enunciated in his “Charter of Democracy” speech, delivered in Columbus in February 1912. There and subsequently, he endorsed the full range of Progressive constitutional reforms: the initiative, referendum, and recall, including the recall of judges and judicial decisions.

Had Roosevelt managed to win the nomination of his party as he came close to doing, it is likely that it would have put its weight behind these reforms and others that appeared later in the platform of the Progressive Party, including, critically, a more expeditious method of amending the Constitution. That would probably have meant amendment by a majority of the popular vote in a majority of the states, as Robert LaFollette suggested. Had that happened—had the Constitution come down to us today amended and re-amended, burdened with all the quick fixes and gimmicks that, at one point or another over the 20th century, captured fleeting majorities—the effort to recover the Founders’ constitutionalism and reorient American politics toward it would obviously have been a much, much trickier proposition.

This is precisely what William Howard Taft, Henry Cabot Lodge, Elihu Root, and other conservatives understood. So they stood against Roosevelt, in spite of deep friendships and in spite of the certainty of splitting the party and losing the election. For they believed that the preservation of the Constitution as it came to them from the Founders had to be their first priority, and they believed that this question would be settled decisively in the Taft–Roosevelt contest of 1912. When the constitutionalists succeeded in keeping the magnificent electoral machinery of the Republican Party out of Roosevelt’s hands, they were able to tell themselves that they had done the one thing needful.

And they were right, I would argue. In spite of the fact that Progressivism would go on to seize the commanding intellectual heights of the past century—in spite of the fact that law schools, political science departments, high-brow journals, and foundations alike told us to transcend and forget about the Founders’ Constitution—it was still there beneath it all, still there largely intact, waiting for rediscovery, still the official charter of the Republic, no matter how abused and ridiculed.

This aspect of the election of 1912—that is, the contest within the Republican Party between Taft and Roosevelt about preserving the Constitution—is almost entirely forgotten today. Shelves and shelves of dissertations and books have been done on Progressivism and socialism in that election, but virtually nothing about conservatism. As we try to recover an understanding of the Founders’ Constitution, so also conservatives need to recover our own history, which has otherwise been completely ignored by the Progressive academy.

Anyway, let us not neglect the sacrificial struggles of men like Root, Taft, and Lodge in seeing to it that we have a constitutional tradition to recover—or, rather, seeing to it that the recovery is worthwhile, because the written Constitution has come down to us largely as it emerged from the pens of the Founders and still commands popular allegiance.

—William A. Schambra is Director of the Hudson Institute’s Bradley Center for Philanthropy and Civic Renewal and editor of *As Far as Republican Principles Will Admit: Collected Essays of Martin Diamond* (American Enterprise Institute, 1992).

This essay was published July 18, 2007.