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Extended Republic or Centralized Nation-State? Herbert Croly, Progressivism, and the Decline of Civic Engagement

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It has often been observed that the 20th century was the most violent in world history. Wars dominated world affairs on an unprecedented scale. What has been less often noted, particularly in the American experience, is the number of wars declared by national governments on social problems like poverty and drugs—and the appallingly low victory rate in those wars.

In a very real sense, the 20th century on the domestic front was an extended cold war between the American federal government and social problems inherited from the 19th century. In foreign wars, failure tends to make the citizens angry. In domestic wars, it tends to make them bored. This civic apathy is often a central ingredient in the failure of social wars, because social change requires the active involvement of the citizenry; in this case, the apathy was unavoidable because of the way the war was fought.

By transforming domestic policy into a climactic struggle between the national government and every conceivable social ill, the early Progressives raised the scale of the solution along with that of the problem. This eliminated civil society from the picture, made social problems too big for little people, and thus guaranteed that the war would be impossible to win.

A HUNDRED YEARS' WAR

The year 2009 marks the centennial of the publication of *The Promise of American Life* by Herbert Croly. In this book, Croly, later the founder of *The New Republic*, warned that the war would be necessary. Inequality and individualism were rampant, and America's social fabric was fraying. America's Founders had made key mistakes in designing its political system, mistakes that were coming to light under the pressures of the new industrialized world. The only way to save America's promise was to mobilize its people through a new, more centralized government that could coordinate their efforts and provide new national unity.

The premise and purpose of Croly's thought was a paradigm that would define the Progressive movement philosophically and dominate much of 20th century politics. Theodore Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson, and other contemporaries sought to lead their nation with ideas based on that paradigm.

President after President since then has sought to fight American individualism by new offensives in the war. Many different public service programs have been introduced, each billed as the final push that would simultaneously meet the national needs and unleash the energies of the American people in national ser-

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vice: Bill Clinton called them "nothing less than the American way to change America."[1]

Yet it seems that new iterations of the war are needed on a regular basis. One hundred years after Croly's call, the social problems remain, and each new President's promise to waken a sleeping giant against the common foe goes unfulfilled. Progressives continue to criticize inequality, they are joined by conservatives in criticizing increased individualism, and the social fabric continues to fray. With each new public service program, Congress pats itself on the back at having finally empowered Americans to serve their country as if such a thing had not been tried a dozen times before. The centennial of Croly's work saw yet another such program, the Serve America Act, taken straight out of Croly and the Progressives' paradigm.

James Wilson, Pennsylvania delegate to the constitutional convention in 1787, wrote:

> The more accurately and the more ingeniously men reason, and the farther they pursue their reasonings, from false principles, the more numerous and the more inveterate will their inconsistencies, nay, their absurdities be. One advantage, however, will result—those absurdities and those inconsistencies will be more easily traced to their proper source. When the string of a musical instrument has a fault only in one place, you know immediately how and where to find and correct it.[2]

If indeed national service programs are the "American way to change America," then it would seem the American way is an abysmal failure, insofar as Progressives like Barack Obama criticize America on precisely the same grounds as did Croly. In fact, Wilson believed that such programs (which he had seen in Europe) were not the American way, and with all the other major players in the American Founding, he spoke out strongly against them.

Far from considering centralized service more compassionate or even more efficient, Wilson and the other leading American Founders considered it petty, unsophisticated, and totally inadequate to the needs of American society. The Founders foresaw the kind of citizen apathy and passivity that would be created by centralized national service programs, and they knew that these programs would undercut the very thing they seek to achieve: an engaged citizenry that identifies problems and then works to solve those problems in its communities.

After examining Herbert Croly's paradigm and the European public service programs that inspired Croly, it will be helpful to look at the traditional American conception of public service and see why contemporary public service programs have failed to produce the widespread public service they were expected to produce.

HERBERT CROLY AND THE PROGRESSIVE VISION OF PUBLIC SERVICE

Croly's ideas were so sprawlingly comprehensive, and his paradigm so far-reaching, that it is inherently unfair to reduce them to a series of maxims. However, the course of his thought incorporated a three-part paradigm that has shaped the conversation on public service ever since, and it is on these three parts that we will focus our attention: a problem, a goal, and a solution.

First, Croly drew a hard line between private interests and public and prioritized almost totally the public over the private. As he saw it, the two primary interests of American life, the warring factions that defined American society, were the individual and the body politic.[3] The pursuit of private interest was an inherently selfish endeavor.

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1 Mark Pitsch, "Clinton Launches Sales Campaign for Service Plan," *Education Week*, Vol. 12, No. 24 (March 10, 1993), p. 1.

2 James Wilson, "Lectures on Law," in *Collected Works of James Wilson* (Indianapolis, Ind.: Liberty Fund, 2007), p. 467.

3 Herbert Croly, *The Promise of American Life* (Filiquarian Publishing, 2007), p. 132.

By "private" interest he meant anything short of the national good. A person who put his own good before the good of the country was selfish, but so was a person who put first his family, business, club, city, or state. The point was not that "selfishness" was wrong—Croly admitted the value of competition—but that putting small-scale interests ahead of the national good was harmful to everyone. Thus, what was right and virtuous had to be what was in the national interest, for reasons of sheer efficiency if nothing else.

Croly believed this attitude was a natural response to the increasing scale of the problems America faced. When large corporations and huge labor unions fought for power across an interstate battlefield, the only hope for the victory of the many over the few was in national unity:

> No voluntary association of individuals, resourceful and disinterested though they be, is competent to assume the responsibility. The problem belongs to the American national democracy, and its solution must be attempted chiefly by means of official national action.[4]

Modern stakes were, in fact, so high that the only two options were official national action and national collapse. State and local governments had proven themselves utterly ineffective in dealing with 20th century problems, crisis loomed, and any further attempt to fight for local interest over the interest of the whole was corrupt and foolhardy.

These developments were natural given the evolution of American society. America from its beginning, Croly argued, had been "committed to the realization of the democratic ideal; and if its Promise is to be fulfilled, it must be prepared to follow whithersoever that ideal may lead."[5] The promise of American life—namely, the collective vision of a better future—meant that the national system had to change with the times so as to better equip itself for further progress.

This need for change existed also because the old American way was responsible for many of the current problems. Americans could never be truly united to face the modern crisis on the basis of the traditional American creed, "because that creed itself is overflowing with inconsistencies and ambiguities."[6] In such a time, especially in a nation that Croly believed was future-oriented by nature, the understanding of the American promise had to evolve past outdated 18th century principles to something that could unite an entire nation.

"Redemption of the National Promise"

It was this concept of national unity that provided the vision for Croly's plan. To be truly American, an idea had to be national. Croly's public–private distinction meant that to be patriotic, an American had to commit himself totally to the interest of the nation as a whole. This meant subordinating one's own needs to the nation, denying all other causes and even people if they came into conflict with the national interest.[7] True public service was entirely altruistic.

Americans, Croly said, had not engaged enough in national service because they did not realize their responsibility to serve the nation in such a way; but in the modern world, "the redemption of the national Promise has become a cause for which the good American must fight, and the cause for which a man fights is a cause which he more than ever values."[8] This fight would create a new solidarity between the warring classes of American society, and individualistic people and groups that stood in its way must fall beneath the blade of national fraternity.[9]

As Croly's ideas later began to gain ground in post-Wilsonian politics, Irving Babbitt wryly observed that

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[4] *Ibid.*, p. 30.
[5] *Ibid.*, p. 10.
[6] *Ibid.*, p. 164.
[7] *Ibid.*, p. 28.
[8] *Ibid.*, p. 27.
[9] *Ibid.*, p. 156.

such hard-nosed nationalism "has been summed up in the phrase: 'Be my brother or I'll kill you.'"[10] But for Croly, Americans and their leaders could no longer assume that the American promise was something that was achieved in the working out of their social, political, and economic relationships. It required conscious direction.

For Croly, this was not direction toward a stated end, but direction toward a state of progress. "The future," of course, is never reached, for as soon as tomorrow becomes today, there is a new tomorrow to be sought. "For better or worse," he added, "democracy cannot be disentangled from an aspiration toward human perfectibility, and hence from the adoption of measures looking in the direction of realizing such an aspiration."[11] For Americans to engage in national service was for them to work selflessly toward the following of a dream—not a dream merely of individual prosperity, but of national success.

Such national success would require a new political apparatus that reflected the needs of the 20th century, not the 18th century. The powerful forces seeking selfish gain in America had created a condition the Founders had never anticipated, and such a condition "demands as a counterpoise a more effective body of national opinion, and a more powerful organization of the national interest."[12] If big business and big labor could bully individuals, the political system needed to be even bigger in order to counteract them. Croly therefore proposed to overhaul the system in light of maximum modern efficiency, centralizing control in the hands of those who could best use it.

"Redemption of the Collective Responsibility"

In this third concept, the means to progress, Croly envisioned no longer a bickering pile of political interests representing the people, but instead a "disinterested" collection of experts. For the ordinary citizen, helping the widow down the street was manageable, but helping "the country" was a little abstract, and a cacophony of interest groups running the government could not make the idea any more real to him. But if enlightened elites ran the government—people who knew the American promise and how to pursue it—they could create national programs to meet national goals. Then the citizen could participate in those programs and know that he was helping the country. He still would not see most of the fruits of his labor, since what he did might not help his immediate environment, but the experts would see the fruits of the collective labor and could pick the fruits for the public good. Then the large-scale economic and social problems could be beaten at a national level.

Real patriots, Croly said, understood that such a triumph of the public over the private interest would require a conscious assertion, and that required conscious direction. Real reformers "behave as if the American ship of state will hereafter require careful steering; and a turn or two at the wheel has given them some idea of the course they must set."[13]

This centralized, professional leadership would actually be more democratic, Croly insisted, than the way America had been run to date. It would allow "men of special ability, training, and eminence a better opportunity to serve the public" and would "supply them with an administrative machinery which would enable them to use their abilities to the best public advantage."[14]

In the 18th century, maximum power was given to the people in their local circumstances (township and state governments); but in a true democratic vision, maximum power would be given to those with the most skill and public spirit, who could act not merely on behalf of their neighbors or special interests but on behalf of the whole nation. These administrators, free from the petty fickleness of partisan politics and motivated only by national interests, could coordinate

[10] Irving Babbitt, *Democracy and Leadership* (Indianapolis, Ind.: Liberty Fund, 1979), p. 151.

[11] Croly, *The Promise of American Life*, p. 496.

[12] *Ibid*., p. 146.

[13] *Ibid*., p. 170.

[14] *Ibid*., p. 189.

the public service efforts of the nation. They would be judged not based on their faithfulness to party lines, but on the naked efficiency of their results.

The merit of such a plan would be "simply that of putting the collective power of the group at the service of its ablest members," who "will never attain to an individual responsibility commensurate with their powers, until they are enabled to work efficiently towards the redemption of the collective responsibility."[15] With the nation's expert leadership guiding it toward the American promise, the common citizens could achieve their own promise collectively in coordinated public service.

For Croly, then, the problem was that America had not yet adopted national government action to get to his broader goal of national unity. The solution would be achieved through the creation of a body of administrative experts who would lead the way to national unity by establishing national programs in which the people could participate, thereby devoting themselves to national goals.

NATIONAL SERVICE AND THE EQUIVALENT OF WAR

The "American promise" that Croly had in mind may have been uniquely American in its ends, but it was heavily European in its means. Europe had known such national oversight since the early 18th century. Cardinal Richelieu in France had spearheaded such a centralization of administrative power in the 17th century, and 18th century French kings had followed his example. But the best example the world had seen, in Croly's view, was the Prussian Otto von Bismarck's centralization of the German states in the mid-19th century.

Unlike the French kingdom, which had seen administrative centralization lead to anarchy, chaos, and finally empire, Prussia had transformed Germany into a veritable factory of social unity and military might. The Iron Chancellor's leadership was "a very striking example" of what leaders could accomplish if they were willing to take on the full load of national responsibility and use every available means to accomplish national goals.[16]

By "national responsibility," Croly meant national administration. Bismarck had used military and social conditions in Germany to mobilize the German peoples, subordinating their local concerns to their "particular place in a comprehensive scheme of national economy" and dividing them among the leadership of hand-picked experts.[17] Rather than the old conglomeration of rival interests, German domestic affairs under Bismarck's leadership were a picture of order and direction. In fact, Croly said admiringly, it was "the most completely responsible and representative monarchy in Europe."[18]

Bismarck's domestic achievements, however, were notable only when considered in the context of his foreign policy. A centralized state, by itself, gives the average citizen nothing to see, nothing to cling to, nothing to do. Bismarck knew from the French that centralization without a cause leaves the people purposeless and apathetic.

After years of having the affairs of their communities directed from Paris, Frenchmen had realized that their efforts were no longer needed and simply stopped trying. Only when the French Revolution broke out did they stir into action, and when the revolution was over, they quickly slipped back into oblivion. Croly described them as "partial economic parasites with very little personal initiative and energy."[19] At the time, this left Robespierre with a difficult question: If revolution was the only thing that kept the people involved, how could he allow the revolution to stop?[20] So the Reign of Terror began, and the French leaders, culminating in Napoleon, learned from experience that

[15] *Ibid*., p. 447.

[16] *Ibid*., p. 275.

[17] *Ibid*., p. 275.

[18] *Ibid*., p. 271.

[19] *Ibid*., p. 269.

[20] Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (New York: Penguin Classics, 1963), p. 125.

a centralized nation-state holds together best when united in a cause against a great enemy.

But the difficulty of centralization is two-edged, because a cause great enough to arouse one nation is great enough to lay waste to others. Bismarck avoided France's mistake and successfully aroused and united the German states by giving the Germans an Iron Chancellor and a warlike nationalism.

Peter Viereck records the German demagogue Friedrich Ludwig Jahn thundering at the time that "Germany needs a war of her own in order to feel her power; she needs a feud with Frenchdom to develop her national way of life in all its fullness."[21] Rather than engage in the intramural jealousies that had kept the German states in a condition of uneasy peace since the Protestant Reformation, Bismarck turned their focus outward by pitting them against an external foe. This enabled him to draw the passions of the Germans out of their local concerns, awakening their old aggression and unleashing it against a common enemy (much as would be done again in 1914 and 1939). War was the food of the nation-state, centralizing power and churning up a sense of national community.

"By War and War Only"

Croly knew this. The unification of Germany could have been achieved "by war and war only,"[22] and with such advantages offered by the situation, "it is no wonder that she remains the chief possible disturber of the European peace."[23] It could not have been just any war, of course. Had Bismarck tried to orchestrate a war against Japan, little would have been accomplished: The war had to be against a great rival or threat. The kind of war that provides the glue for a nation-state is a war for its soul: a war that provides a field on which it can plant its flag.

It was such a war that Croly proposed. Croly did not want citizens shut out of politics as they were in France. He wanted them mobilized as they were in Germany: mobilized for war. In America's situation, in a pre–Great War era of isolationism, the war could hardly be military.

Croly recognized the value of war, even going so far as to suggest that regular war is the best recipe for domestic peace, but the cause for which he really wanted to mobilize the American people was the kind William James called in 1906 "the moral equivalent of war." Like Bismarck, he saw a crucial link between foreign and domestic policy and knew that the right common enemy could excite the patriotic passions of Americans, perhaps better even than the Germans. But since America (practically speaking) could not have constant wars, Croly wanted to make a peacetime effort to replicate war's effect on the social order. This, of course, would achieve the effect not only of arousing the people, but also of mobilizing them to confront the larger crisis he believed was occurring.

The common enemy for America was a challenge to its own soul—not to its material interests, but to the promise of American life itself. Americans were always enthusiastic about wars when the wars were perceived as threats to their way of life. They saw that way of life as definitive of their existence. To them, "the pursuit of happiness" was itself the American promise, something real because it was worked out daily in their own self-government. "Liberty" or "equality" might be abstract by itself, but when the farmer could participate in political debate and discourse with a rich merchant in a town meeting, it was concrete and essential. In this way, local self-government provided a constant outlet for their patriotic passions that did not require war or cause instability.

If administration was to be centralized and the American promise redefined as something that required centralized direction, this advantage would be negated. With local governments rendered largely obsolete by the centralization of power under the experts, Americans would need a new outlet for their passion for defending the American promise.

[21] Peter Viereck, *Conservatism Revisited: The Revolt Against Ideology* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Publishers, 2009), p. 97.

[22] Croly, *The Promise of American Life*, p. 273.

[23] *Ibid*., p. 278.

What Croly proposed, therefore, was to turn that passion inward. The new vehicle: wars against the social problems that threatened the American promise. These wars, spurred by the exhortations of central planning agencies, would provide the motivation for Americans to participate in the Bismarckian mobilization. No longer could Americans lie idle in their selfish local interests; the nation called them to action. The economy of scale would be applied to politics, and war would be the capital.

This constant "state of war" was a great boon to centralization of power in the national government. Like an ideal itself, a Progressive government must define itself by its opposition to something. Since its identity is tied to the fighting of a foe, its success is judged by the scale and incessancy of its actions, and the need for constant and aggressive action leads to more and more centralization, particularly in the administrative parts of government. The early Progressive Presidents took full advantage of these facts.

"Seeing Crises Where Others Saw Only Problems"

Like the efforts to arouse America to war against Spain in Cuba, the efforts to arouse her to social wars saw early success. Woodrow Wilson was the perfect candidate to fire the first shot. Robert Nisbet has observed that "Wilson burned and burned as moralist, seeing crises where others saw only problems," even sending an army to invade Mexico in response to Pancho Villa's banditry at the border.[24] Franklin Delano Roosevelt, who faced a true social crisis in the Great Depression, was similarly clear in his framing of issues. He declared in his first inaugural address, "I assume unhesitatingly the leadership of this great army of our people dedicated to a disciplined attack upon our common problems."[25]

Progressive centralization was rapid and common during these years, and the Depression and two world wars provided emotional ammunition enough to keep the people's focus. The notion of "We pulled together and won" spoke to the national mood throughout this period, both as a response to America's situation and as skillful national propaganda.

Thankfully, the Progressives did not follow Bismarck's blueprint in all of this. Only reluctantly did Wilson enter the Great War, and only reluctantly did Roosevelt become the wartime President instead of the New Deal President. Fundamentally, they wanted the mobilization Bismarck achieved without the physical violence.

The quandary this created for the public service question came from the difference between two things Croly had chosen to conflate: being aroused for a cause and being aroused for a country. Croly wanted to make the country itself a cause; but as Robespierre had discovered, no cause can live long as a substitute for political relevance. No centralized power had previously achieved long-term social mobilization without a war, and this remained true in the American experience: A cause that operated on a larger-than-human scale did not arouse the kind of permanent interest that American local politics had previously known.

After a while, the postwar Presidents were forced to acknowledge the effects of this truth, though not the root problem. At its most successful, Crolyite Progressivism aroused some amount of sudden interest, but it was inevitably followed by just as sudden a rise in apathy as public service was further divorced from normal everyday life. More commonly, the inherently less dynamic power of a peacetime call to service met with feeble response from the populace. In both cases, the intense, cause-specific enthusiasm of war could not be translated permanently into stable, general public-spiritedness.

This meant in practice that 20th century Presidents frequently charged into office with calls to new wars, hoping to arouse an increasingly disconnected populace into real public-spirited participation. From

[24] Robert Nisbet, *The Present Age* (Indianapolis, Ind.: Liberty Fund, 1988), p. 31.

[25] Franklin Delano Roosevelt, "First Inaugural Address," in *Inaugural Addresses of the Presidents of the United States* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1989), at *http://www.bartleby.com/124/pres49.html* (May 14, 2009).

the Community Conservation Corps to VISTA (Volunteers in Service to America) to the Serve America Act, American leaders proved to each generation on a national stage that Americans, while privately generous, did not feel a common call to the kind of national service that Croly said would define the newly remodeled nation. The emergence of each new program underlined the fact that the previous one had not done the trick, and each one had to be replaced or reinvented within a generation.

For Croly, perhaps this would not have been entirely disappointing: The promise of American life was something to be constantly sought, not found.[26] But his faith in the value of the seeking was not validated with either the selflessness or the stability that he expected. The combination of centralization and war did not replicate, let alone surpass, the kind of civic participation common to early America. The nation did not face the lows of chaos and war experienced by France and Germany, but neither did it see the kind of central mobilization Croly wanted. Widespread public service, in the Crolyite sense of constant, altruistic devotion to "the public" via centralized coordination—really a reshaping of society in the national image—never materialized.

THE OLD AMERICAN ORDER

The reasons for this failure began with Croly's desire to refound American society. By replacing local orders with a national order, Croly was aware that he was tinkering with what had been the foundations of the nation. Those foundations, he believed, had become a shackle, both by their inadequacy and by their promotion of local self-interest. A revolution was necessary to shake those chains, and revolutions are inherently unstable.

But Croly's system did not rest, as the Founders' had, on the bottom of the social order. Its stability was not derived from local roots at all, but rather from the central planners. Thus, a revolution at the bottom actually provided the central planners with the political impetus needed to do their work where, in another context, it would be harmful. In a very real way, Croly's envisioned order depended on disorder itself.

Croly claimed that such a course would be what some, at least, of the Founders would have wished: "The attempt to unite the Hamiltonian principle of national political responsibility and efficiency with a frank democratic purpose will give a new meaning to the Hamiltonian system of political ideas and a new power to democracy."[27] If that meant riding the crashing waves of war, then so be it.

Yet the very system Hamilton had a hand in creating did not seem to react readily to Croly's ideas; at any rate, "the great army of our people" never showed up to fight for long. Part of the reason may have been that the design for the society on which Croly sought to try his plan was radically different from what Croly claimed. Croly's attempt to co-opt Hamilton in support of his view was disingenuous, but this was not unusual: The history he narrated often bore little resemblance to actual events. Hamilton, who feared the kind of disorder that Croly proposed, was a virulent critic of revolutionary France and its headlong effort to abandon traditional order in favor of centralized administration:

> The practical development of this pernicious system has been seen in France. It has served as an engine to subvert all her ancient institutions, civil and religious, with all the checks that served to mitigate the rigor of authority; it has hurried her headlong through a rapid series of dreadful revolutions, which have laid waste property, made havoc among the arts, overthrown cities, desolated provinces, unpeopled regions, crimsoned her soil with blood, and deluged it in crime, poverty, and wretchedness; and all this as yet for no better purpose than to erect on the ruins of former things a despotism

[26] Croly, *The Promise of American Life*, p. 11.

[27] *Ibid*., p. 171.

> unlimited and uncontrolled; leaving to a deluded, an abused, a plundered, a scourged, and an oppressed people, not even the shadow of liberty to console them for a long train of substantial misfortunes, of bitter suffering.[28]

While Hamilton's prose might have been more evocative than that of Washington or Adams, he was not alone in his view of the instability caused by France's course of action. Madison wrote that it was the reason, not the passions, of a people that should regulate the government.[29] The Alien and Sedition Acts of Adams's Administration bear witness to the widespread fear by more conservative American leaders that France's excesses would be echoed in the United States. Even Jefferson, sympathizing more than most with France's ideals, was eventually forced to regard France as the dangerous and unstable power it became.

Yet while the American Revolution had often been threatened by disunity, it had never been threatened by the kind of widespread social implosion that was experienced by France. Nor did America respond readily or radically to Croly's ideas, gradually absorbing many of them at the federal level without the kind of revolutionary changes seen by France at the local level. The American order was built upon local stability and consequently did not react to ideology nearly as quickly or radically as France did.

"The Kind of Self-Government Best Fitted to Their Needs"

As we have noted, the political power of the kingdom of France was increasingly centralized over the course of the 17th and 18th centuries. Where the French village had once operated much as the American township did in terms of local control, the king eventually put so many Parisian bureaucrats in charge of local affairs that Alexis de Tocqueville wrote that "the 'common people' ceased to take any active part in local government and lost all interest in it."[30] Tocqueville described peasants who depended upon "a powerful foreigner called the government" so totally that they no longer took efforts to maintain even their own streets and communities.[31] France unintentionally achieved the kind of bottom-up instability that Croly advocated, but unlike in America, "the people" in France did not exist as a political force before their revolution.

The result was that by the time of the Revolution, the French social order had little or no tangible meaning and depended entirely upon Paris. The king even tried instituting local assemblies, but the results were catastrophic because the locals had forgotten generations ago how to govern themselves. The French peasants had so little control over their own lives that when the government tottered, they felt their last source of stability vanish. France would be in a constant state of revolution for decades, swaying constantly between anarchy and dictatorship.

Croly acknowledged both the social anarchy and the individualism but said that the problem was not in the revolution at the bottom, but rather the lack of power at the top. In keeping with his philosophy, he praised the instability of the French Revolution, calling it "the route whereby a people, inexperienced in self-government, have been gradually traveling towards the kind of self-government best fitted to their needs."[32] The guillotine and the oceans of blood that were shed were simply part of the scientific equation. What the French really needed, he suggested, was more central power rather than less: Had the kings and dictators had more administrative power, perhaps the violence of the revolutions could have been guided in a constructive direction.

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[28] Henry Cabot Lodge, ed., *The Works of Alexander Hamilton*, Vol. VIII (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1904), pp. 284–285.

[29] James Madison, *Federalist* No. 49, in Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, and John Jay, *The Federalist*, ed. Terence Ball (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 248.

[30] Alexis de Tocqueville, *The Old Regime and the French Revolution*, trans. Stuart Gilbert (New York: Doubleday, 1983), p. 45.

[31] Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. and ed. Harvey Mansfield and Delba Winthrop (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), p. 88.

[32] Croly, *The Promise of American Life*, p. 265.

In contrast, the Americans in 1787 had a long history of governing themselves that predated their constitution by hundreds of years. "What was a passion and a 'taste' in France," Hannah Arendt observed, "clearly was an experience in America."[33]

The Americans thought it inconceivable that a people that had existed as France had—living in what Tocqueville called "quasi-paternal tutelage" with its national identity defined only by a government—would want to return to such a state. But that is essentially what Croly proposed: centralized administration supported by constant war (or "revolution," to use Robespierre's word). His solution to the French problem was increased centralization with scientific efficiency, not the local freedom the 18th century Americans so prized.

Balancing Change with Order

The disconnect between Croly and his ancestors, however, went deeper than freedom. It was freedom the French revolutionaries sought (however wildly) to obtain. The reason they could not obtain it was that they had no remaining social order on which to base it. Where "the people" to the French could mean nothing more than the aggregate of individuals living in France, "We the People" in the American Constitution had a far more complex meaning that encompassed the political associations of every township and state. Where Croly sought to base a national regime on constant revolution, the American leaders, in founding their new national regime, sought to preserve a preexisting, stable order that they hoped need never know revolution.

In other words, both Croly and the Founders sought to balance change with order. In Croly's mind, the Progressive society would find its vitality in the constant revolution of causes, and that vitality would be stabilized by a permanent bureaucracy.

The Framers of the Constitution wanted precisely the reverse of this dichotomy. For them, stability was in the unchanging cause of liberty, and change was in the revolution of leaders. They saw in the French dynamic no dependable social structure in which Frenchmen could live their lives as public servants. The government was the only permanent force in their lives. In contrast, the American order was not an abstract one or a revolution (real or constructed). Their leaders might (and must) change with each election, but the political apparatus of their self-government—civil society—was real, tangible, and permanent.

Thus, when the French revolted against Louis XVI, society collapsed because the most important thing holding it together—the central government—was gone. When the Americans revolted against George III, only the least relevant part of their government—a formerly lenient landlord 3,000 miles away—had disappeared. Their social order, the townships and colonies in which they lived their lives, both private and public, remained.

Because the roots of the American order were many and deep, the motivation for public spirit did not depend on national events or central planning. This is not to say that local institutions let the American citizen do as he pleased. "On the contrary," Tocqueville observed, the Americans "imposed on him more varied social obligations than elsewhere."[34] The difference was in the source and nature of the obligations. In a situation that Croly would have found surprising in 1909, Tocqueville saw local communities functioning with strong civic participation and little or no poverty—without the aid of a single central planner.

Some scholars have observed that national election turnout has been consistently low in America and that this was no different in Tocqueville's day. What this critique demonstrates, however, is that in Tocqueville's day the citizens considered the federal government largely irrelevant to their daily lives; it reveals nothing about public spirit, because Americans' civic participation was, in practice, local.

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33 Arendt, *On Revolution*, p. 110.

34 Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, p. 67.

Whatever might be occurring at the national level, whatever might be true or false in the abstract world of philosophies and great causes, the citizens' families, neighborhoods, and towns would always need them. War and social causes might interest them for a while, but always present was the immediacy of duty to one's neighbors: what Cicero described as "the conservation of organized society…rendering to every man his due, and…the faithful discharge of obligations assumed."[35] In the early 19th century America that Tocqueville saw, public service was for the average citizen an endeavor tied to permanence and place—not fleeting causes and a far-off "foreigner called the government."

FROM EXTENDED REPUBLIC TO CENTRALIZED NATION-STATE

Historically, as Tocqueville's observation about obligations implies, American society had not been a place where selfishness predominated. Croly, however, believed it was too individualistic and had to be replaced. The question was whether this could be done without leading to the apathy of the French or the wars of the Germans. Could the European systems be fixed and superimposed on an American society that had a very different political and social makeup? Would Americans engage in public service for a nation-state to greater effect than for a community? Fundamentally, what was it about the old order that worked so well in fostering public service, and was Croly right that centralized administration could do it better?

For Croly, the central flaw in the old way of public service was its inherent selfishness. He questioned the moral validity of a political system founded on the individual pursuit of happiness and urged its rejection in favor of a new nationalistic system. But for Washington, Adams, and their philosophically diverse compatriots, public service was part of the pursuit of happiness. The term "pursuit of happiness" had both a private and a public meaning in an Aristotelian sense that saw part of human fulfillment in social involvement. This was why they spoke of civic virtue in the same breath as civil liberty. Pursuing happiness in the public sense meant contributing to the health of one's own community—as Arendt later put it, "having a share in the public business."[36]

It was this concept that shaped the Founders' understanding of public service. For them, *public service was inherently political, based on responsibilities and not altruism, and anathema to the kind of bureaucracy Croly envisioned.* It was these distinctions that made them reject the contemporary European bureaucracies, and it was these distinctions that made Tocqueville, who believed that bureaucracies were often more efficient, prefer the Founders' approach to public service.

Croly's basic political paradigm was based on a rigid opposition between the individual and society. Post-Enlightenment thinkers like John Stuart Mill had held up the individual as the greatest good and society as the great evil enslaving him. Croly saw history as having shifted in the opposite direction: Society, as Rousseau said, was (or could be) good, but only if the selfish individual learned that his value "consis[ted] in [his] relation to the whole, which is the social organization."[37]

What was new about Croly was that not only was the atomistic individual to be abhorred, but so also were the intermediate institutions of civil society and local government that prompted him to veer away from acting in the higher collective good. Instead of classing those institutions with society as other thinkers had done, Croly classed them with the individual and condemned them together for their resistance to nationalism.

It was this paradigm that led him to draw such a hard line between the private and the public good and to criticize Americans so harshly for being selfish individualists. In his line of thought, peacetime

[35] Marcus Tullius Cicero, *On Duties* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), p. 17.

[36] Arendt, *On Revolution*, p. 110.

[37] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile, or On Education*, trans. William H. Payne (New York: Prometheus Books, 2003), p. 5.

Americans had always been individualists because "private" good meant anything short of the national good. Whether he spoke of the national good as an expedient response to troubled times or as the idealistic fulfillment of the American promise, he believed that it was morally wrong for a citizen to squabble in petty partisan politics or put local affairs first in such troubled national circumstances. That citizen should be seeking the "public" good, engaging in an apolitical breed of "public" service that would help the nation.

"A Society with Other Beings"

The old way of public service was inherently unacceptable to Croly because it rejected his individual-against-society paradigm entirely—not only in the form which said that the nation was the greatest good, but also in the form which said that the individual was the greatest good. Thoughtful Americans did not consider the private and the public to be things that could be totally separated. The rights and duties of a citizen could not be conceived of in the abstract—whether the abstract of private rationality or the abstract of a far off "foreigner called the government." Even actions of the intellect are typically exercised in community, as James Wilson observed:

> Some operations of the mind may take place in a solitary state: others, from their very nature, are social; and necessarily suppose a communication with some other intelligent being. In a state of absolute solitude, one may apprehend, and judge and reason. But when he bears or hears testimony; when he gives or receives a command; when he enters into an engagement by a promise or a contract; these acts imply necessarily something more than apprehension, judgment, and reasoning; they imply necessarily a society with other beings, social as well as intelligent.[38]

[38] Wilson, "Lectures on Law," in *Collected Works of James Wilson*, p. 624.

Consequently, there could be no such thing as apolitical or "disinterested" public service. For Wilson and the other Founders, public service was inherently political because interpersonal rights and duties could exist only in the context of a community of souls. To speak of the individual and society, the private and the public, as if they were mutually exclusive was absurd—and to speak of them as if they were mutually opposed was destructive to human society itself.

It was certainly possible to conceive of a blacksmith who never did anything to help the federal government; the two were so far from each other that their relationship must by necessity be understood in the abstract. But it was difficult to conceive of the same blacksmith as an individual whose interest was entirely inconsistent with that of his local community. To be so, he would have to shun the town meetings, his neighbors, his family, the cleanliness of his shop and his street, and for that matter his occupation itself.

This is why it was so important for civil society and local government to be politically relevant: They empowered citizens to act as social beings instead of as selfish individuals. As Brook Manville and Josiah Ober contend, "engagement ensures that each citizen has a genuine and action-based sense of ownership in the organization."[39] If the blacksmith, having such a stake in his environment, did not contribute to it, then he could truly be considered a selfish individualist, and Americans typically held such recluses in contempt.

"A Concern for the Common Well-Being"

Such people, however, were rare. Tocqueville noted that exercises of local liberties "make many citizens put value on the affection of their neighbors and those close to them" and therefore "constantly bring men closer to one another, despite the instincts that separate them, and force them to aid each other."[40] This was

[39] Brook Manville and Josiah Ober, *A Company of Citizens: What the World's First Democracy Teaches Leaders About Creating Great Organizations* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2003), p. 124.

[40] Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, p. 487.

possible only in the small-scale arena. "[S]mall-scale politics," writes Joshua Mitchell in his analysis of Tocqueville, "combats the disposition of the Augustinian soul to withdraw into itself.… Only local politics can revitalize human life in the interplay of the *face-to-face*."[41] This interplay therefore had to occur. Early Americans, contrary to popular opinion, were not *laissez-faire* in their economics or their politics, but they believed that the politics of scale could not match local politics in drawing the individual to serve his neighbor.

For the average citizen, the pursuit of happiness in the public sense could not be made in a national context. It was the pursuit of a meaningful contribution to a local community, the desire to be rightfully respected, as Adams said, "by the people about him, and within his knowledge."[42] How could there be such a hard line between private and public, between the individual and society, that either could be held up as "good" and the other as "bad?" How could "public service" be apolitical if it took place in a community in which citizens had invested "our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honor?"

The paradigm later adapted by Croly had appealed to the French because they had no civil society by the time of the Revolution—nothing between them as individuals and the national government. The paradigm gave them something to grasp. But it meant nothing to the American colonists, for whom civil society—the bridging of individual and nation—was the means of public service itself.

Public service in their context could not be based on "public spiritedness," either in the sense of an abstract selflessness or in the sense of an abstract nationalism. Richard Vetterli and Gary Bryner record that in America, public service "was seen as a concern for the common well-being, not an all-consuming and unqualified acquiescence to the political regime. It was expected that people would voluntarily temper their demands and pursuits enough so that liberty could flourish."[43]

It was this phenomenon that Locke sought to rationalize when he wrote of the relinquishing of certain "natural" liberties so that the community (including the individual) might succeed. American public service found its origin not in the creation of a new selfless man, but in the voluntary fulfillment of responsibilities to people with whom one had real political and social relationships.

Tocqueville did not emphasize those relationships in an effort to downplay patriotism or loyalty to country. Rather, he sharply criticized the kind of militant nationalism practiced by France and later advocated by Croly, which dissolved local institutions, interests, and loyalties to the benefit of that "unqualified acquiescence" to the nation-state.

James Madison also warned that such acquiescence led to the kind of intentional instability that Croly later advocated. In the large, decentralized republic that he desired, "a rage for paper money, for an abolition of debts, for an equal division of property, for any other improper or wicked project, will be less apt to pervade the whole body of the Union."[44] This claim in *Federalist* No. 10 is most often referenced because of its argument for the viability of a large republic, but it is equally significant for the case it makes for decentralization. Madison maintained that divorcing Americans from their localities, as France had done, only opened them up to the same kind of apathy and anarchy that France had seen.

"The First Principle…of Public Affections"

Edmund Burke, in his critique of the French Revolution, wrote disapprovingly of its totalizing nationalism. "[T]o love the little platoon we belong to in society," he maintained, "is the first principle (the germ as

[41] Joshua Mitchell, *The Fragility of Freedom: Tocqueville on Religion, Democracy, and the American Future* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), p. 109. Emphasis in original.

[42] John Adams, *Discourses on Davila*, in *The Works of John Adams*, Vol. 6 (Boston: Little & Brown, 1851), p. 233.

[43] Richard Vetterli and Gary Bryner, *In Search of the Republic: Public Virtue and the Roots of American Government* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 1996), p. 3.

[44] James Madison, *Federalist* No. 10, in Hamilton, Madison, and Jay, *The Federalist*, p. 46.

it were) of public affections."[45] America, as an extended republic, depended even more—not less—on that first principle.

The reason American social order survived its so-called revolution when France's did not was that in America, "public" loyalty was something real that was exercised every day in the process of local self-government. In the land that Tocqueville saw, "the native country makes itself felt everywhere," not because each town was a piece of a larger constructed state, but because the larger constructed state was a reflection of the organically developed townships and states that comprised it. Thus, when an American saw his nation succeed, he rejoiced in that success because "he believes he recognizes his own work."[46] Unlike the French system, which led to social and political problems because it had no human-scaled foundation, American society was based on the permanent, the small, and the local—on the things that bred responsibilities.

It was this belief that led Jefferson to reject centralization as a method of promoting public service. The American town was a "ward republic," without which no public spirit could be fostered. He argued that "it is by division and subdivision of duties alone, that all matters, great and small, can be managed to perfection. And the whole is cemented by giving to every citizen, personally, a part in the administration of the public affairs."[47] Foreshadowing Tocqueville's later observations, he said that citizens involved in their own local self-government were precisely the people who would be motivated to patriotism and public service, because they knew from experience that their stake of ownership in the society was real.[48] "Public service" was the daily operation of a functioning community of citizens, and it owed its origin, its continued motivation, and its purpose to that community.

THE DIMINISHED SPIRIT OF THE CITY

It is this understanding that makes plain why the Founders so unanimously feared administrative centralization. Croly praised the American pioneer spirit and proposed to turn that spirit inward in his social crusades. But even the pioneers traveled in small groups and started towns wherever they settled: In keeping with Madison's picture of the decentralized republic, they always had a small scale from which to relate to the large scale.

Croly wanted to eradicate this small scale as the base of American political operations: He wanted to free the individual from such "selfish" responsibilities. But if that were to happen, Jefferson insisted, the American's ability to pioneer would itself be eradicated. With his ownership in a human-scaled political unit rendered obsolete, he would be dependent on central elites for his (artificially created) rights and responsibilities—and would have lost anything that made the term "public service" meaningful.

The irony is that as Progressivism has evolved, public service programs have been increasingly sold as exercises in national compassion. Regardless of whether it is efficient in alleviating suffering, mass organization cannot be compassionate. Compassion—sharing the suffering of another—can be given only to a person, not a generalization or an idea. To turn it into a mass product cheapens it beyond recognition as the human value to which modern Progressives appeal; Arendt notes that "it depersonalizes the sufferers, lump[ing] them together into an aggregate."[49]

National Efficiency vs. Relationships

Unlike his later adherents, Croly seems to have known this, for he never argued for his system based on grounds of compassion, but rather on the more intellectually honest grounds of national efficien-

[45] Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (Indianapolis, Ind.: Liberty Fund, 1999), p. 136.

[46] Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, p. 90.

[47] Thomas Jefferson, Letter to Samuel Kercheval, 12 July 1816, in *The Works of Thomas Jefferson, Federal Edition*," Vol. 12 (New York and London: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1905), p. 3.

[48] Paul Rahe, *Soft Despotism, Democracy's Drift: Montesquieu, Rousseau, Tocqueville, and the Modern Prospect* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2009), p. 201.

[49] Arendt, *On Revolution*, p. 75.

cy. Public service for Croly was a matter of meeting national needs and obligations, not the matter James Wilson saw of meeting obligations to friends, neighbors, or constituents—to those with whom one had a relationship that allowed for actual compassion. Croly was aware of what he was rejecting and that his proposal was alien to it.

Croly failed to foresee the consequences of eliminating that political relationship. The modern world is familiar with the Apathetic Citizen, or the extreme individualist (Tocqueville in fact coined the latter term). This person may be compassionate at the personal level but is "not really into politics." It was this person, taken to the extreme, who developed in France during the centralization of the 18th century.

It is easy to make the argument that centralized public service sends the wrong message to citizens, but for Wilson and Jefferson and others, the problem went deeper than that. The more important point to them was that in a real, conscious, purposeful sense, centralized service strips citizens of the link between the reason for service (responsibilities to those served) and the service itself. Drawing from Tocqueville, Mitchell warns that "the consequence is not simply the relocation of the locus of political power from the local to the national level, but also the destruction of the site where practical experience may be nurtured."[50]

Thus, far from combating individualism, the Founders believed that centralized administration fomented it by rendering useless the incubator of the political relationships that allowed for both strong public service and effective self-government. Instead of Croly's paradigm of individualists and civil society versus the nation, they saw a paradigm in which local self-government was the guard against both individualism and nationalism. Disconnected individuals had nothing to unite them but the state and nothing to motivate them to service but coercion or theatrics. Local self-government united the individual with the nation in a way that benefited the latter and empowered the former, making public service more common and hence more effective.

"An Active Sentiment of Attachment"

Alexander Hamilton believed in a strong national government, but he nonetheless expected that the federal government would be "less likely to inspire a habitual sense of obligation and an active sentiment of attachment"[51] than local government, and rightly so. A person's family, neighborhood, and city—the things that are most visible and shape his immediate interests and responsibilities—naturally go first on his priority list. As a matter of consistent interest, people are far more drawn to the matters that affect their everyday lives. Thus, public service, because it should be concerned with everyday life, could not be done in (or coordinated by) an office building thousands of miles away. It had to have local meaning, not as a national deed done in a satellite location, but as a deed rooted in a place and its people.

An attempt to shift individual responsibility for service from local relationships to the national identity was, Hamilton believed, a doomed effort. It might lead to apathy as it had initially in France, it might lead to chaos as it later did, or it might lead to a fluctuation between the two (dependent on the theatrics of war) as it had in Germany, but it could not lead to stable, consistent service. Even if such a system were more efficient in meeting short-term material goals, the damage done to the true foundations of public spirit would be far too high a price to pay. Each new generation's national "war on poverty" would only ensure that the following generation, even more apathetic, found its own war more difficult.

It was perfectly consistent with Croly's paradigm that his ideas should reach the conclusion they did, but the consistent failure of Crolyite policies to achieve their goals of national mobilization is testament to the flaws in the paradigm itself. The old American way of

[50] Mitchell, *The Fragility of Freedom*, p. 113.

[51] Alexander Hamilton, *Federalist* No. 17, in Hamilton, Madison, and Jay, *The Federalist*, p. 77.

public service was based on human realities for which Croly's quest for centralization did not account. In the end, as Tocqueville wrote:

> Administrative centralization is fit only to enervate the peoples who submit to it, because it constantly tends to diminish the spirit of the city in them.… It makes the nation triumph on the day of combat and diminishes its power in the long term. It can therefore contribute admirably to the passing greatness of one man, not to the lasting prosperity of a people.[52]

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[52] Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, p. 83.