



Why America is Great:

**The Rise of Progressives and the
Growth of the Bureaucratic State**

Volume VIII

“Administrative centralization, it is true, succeeds at uniting at a given period and in a certain place all the disposable strength of the nation . . . but it is harmful to the reproduction of strength. It can therefore contribute admirably to the passing greatness of one man, not to the lasting prosperity of a people.”

—Alexis de Tocqueville,
*Democracy in America*¹



Writing to an associate in 1788, Thomas Jefferson remarked, “the natural progress of things is for liberty to yield and government to gain ground.”² How true this is, especially when the people allow it to happen.

It seems ironic today that one of the most intense debates over the ratification of the Constitution was the question of whether or not it gave the federal government too much power. The bitter conflict between the Federalists, who favored a strong federal government, and the Anti-Federalists, who argued that centralized power would threaten the rights of states and individual citizens, almost torpedoed the entire constitutional movement.

However, in 21st century America, we the people not only allow the government into some of our most intimate spaces, we actually *invite* it in. We still talk a great deal about our “rights,” but our understanding of those rights has changed. Historically, Americans understood their individual rights to be boundary markers showing where the government was not to intrude into their lives. But over time, we have come to treat rights as claims *on* the government—as the “things,” great or small, that the government is supposed to give us. Instead of demanding that the government stay within its constitutional boundaries, we welcome it where it was never meant to go.

How did we get to this point? This transformation in our thinking took root in the 19th century and accelerated in the 20th, fueled by some of the most dramatic social and political changes in American history. Led by the educated, a broad-based social movement emerged attracting the poor, oppressed, and disillusioned. Eloquent rhetoricians and writers began training the American people to look to the federal government to help them, advocate for them, and provide for them. The Progressive Movement was born.

The Unholy Alliance

In the 1880s, the United States, eager to crawl out of the rubble of the Civil War (1861–1865), entered a period of remarkable economic growth and prosperity. American innovation, combined with the country's seemingly infinite natural resources, provided unprecedented opportunities for amassing wealth. The railroad, steel, and oil industries exploded. As economic power shifted from agrarian regions to

urban centers, farmers and laborers flocked to the cities for new jobs at factories, refineries, and mills. At the same time, immigrants—some 20 million between 1880 and 1920³—crowded to American shores in search of a new life, flooding the market with cheap labor. The immigrants brought new cultures, traditions, and loyalties that altered the American social and political landscape forever.



The so-called Gilded Age made the wealthy richer than ever before. In fact, the upper class believed they had a social responsibility to show off their wealth to each other, to the public, and to the European aristocracy that had always looked down on them.⁴ Business thrived in a loosely regulated economy. Companies grew and merged into corporations, and corporations developed into trusts.⁵ As power and wealth increased, unfortunately so did opportunities for corruption. Politicians at both the state and federal level were willing to pull strings for big businesses in order to benefit. The notorious “robber barons” were able to manipulate the market to their advantage, frequently exchanging favors and kickbacks with politicians who helped them. Industrial tycoons developed close relationships with government insiders and together they formed immensely powerful political machines. As the rich grew more powerful, the working classes sank deeper into oppression. Laborers worked long hours for low wages, and often in hazardous conditions. Workers and their families were crowded into city slums.



The deepening class disparity and its incumbent social concerns sparked debate and protests across the country. Left-leaning, educated activists began forming a new political philosophy that they believed would mitigate class oppression and discourage the “unholy alliance” between business and politics.⁶ Progressives, as they called themselves, agreed with most Americans that everyone—the worker as well as the



Herbert Croly

business owner—should have a fair opportunity to succeed. The Progressives argued that a truly democratic government should not just protect equal opportunities, but should also be empowered to step in and regulate business practices and social conditions as necessary in order to guarantee equal opportunity to all. As Progressive writer Herbert Croly wrote: “[P]opular government is to make itself expressly and permanently responsible for the amelioration of the individual and society.”⁷

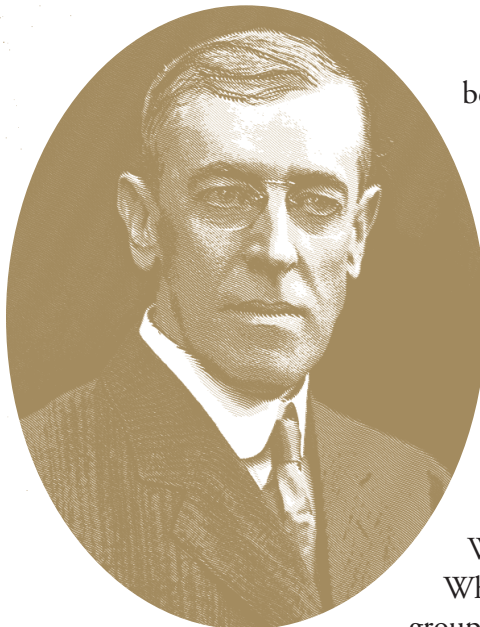
Progressive philosophy began to inspire various reforms, many of them pertaining to elections:

- **Direct Election of U.S. Senators.** Progressives successfully campaigned for a constitutional amendment that would take the power of electing U.S. senators out of the hands of state legislatures and put it into the hands of the people. The Seventeenth Amendment was designed to end the “cozy” relationship between big money and state politics by requiring senators to respond to the voter base.
- **Direct Primaries.** During this period, political parties had enormous leeway in determining which candidates were nominated for public office. The direct primary, instituted as a way of returning this influence to the people, permitted the voters themselves to whittle down the choice of candidates for the general election.
- **Changes to Ballots.** For decades, Americans used a variety of balloting methods in their elections. Powerful local interests and political parties often used these methods to their advantage. It was common practice for party officials to provide voters with “pre-packaged” ballots that listed only the party’s candidates. Progressives fought successfully for a slate of rules to regulate balloting that would eliminate all undue influences on voters. One result was the implementation of the Australian ballot. This ballot, which was completely secret, listed all candidates running for office and was handed out by official poll workers, not party activists.⁸

While these reforms addressed some genuine problems in the election process, they also introduced new problems. The Seventeenth Amendment unwittingly threw off the built-in balance of the federal system. State legislatures had originally been given the power to elect senators in order to provide a “check” on both the federal government and the shifting winds of public opinion. With the Seventeenth Amendment, the states were stripped of their representation in Washington. The federal government was suddenly elevated to a position of authority it had never enjoyed before. This change also opened the door for the federal government to oversee the day-to-day issues affecting citizens. State and local governments began to take more subservient roles. And while direct primaries and Australian ballots may have curbed party power, they also eliminated the parties’ ability to hold elected officials accountable for their actions.

Foster Father to the People

As the Progressive mindset began to permeate American society, the general public became more and more comfortable seeing the federal government as a guardian who could solve all social ills. And if the federal government was going to solve all social ills, it had to be a well-endowed, well-oiled machine. People began to see *bureaucracy* as a sign of health and efficiency. Politicians, who stood to

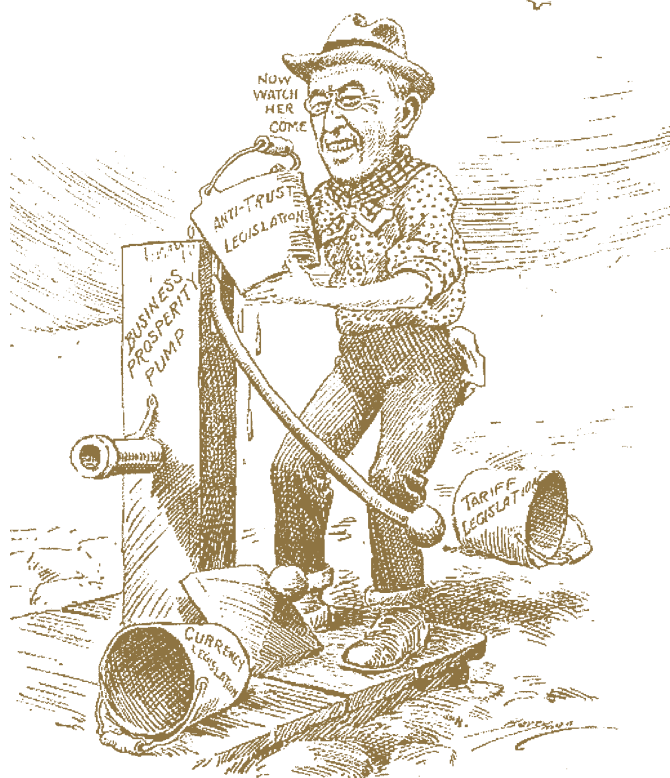


benefit from a powerful, centralized government, encouraged this way of thinking.

The Progressive Movement received a huge boost in 1912 when Democrat Woodrow Wilson was elected President. Wilson, formerly president of Princeton University and Governor of New Jersey, believed that government was not only responsible for promoting the public interest but also for *deciding* what was “best” for the people. To him, the government was a benevolent figure, capable of and responsible for guiding the public.

Wilson expressed these views during his presidential campaign. While stumping in Scranton, Pennsylvania, where he addressed a group of miners, Wilson stressed the government’s need—and right—to regulate industry. He referred to the U.S. Bureau of Mines as a “foster father of the miners of the United States,” whose job it was “to see that the life of human beings [in this case, miners] was...safeguarded.”⁹ Wilson believed government should play a role in monitoring not only business practices but also human behavior and relationships. Using the metaphor of a benign “patrolman” with a lamp, Wilson indicated that government, in the hands of the right people, should go “through all the passages of the beehive in which we live, and see to it that men are remaining our neighbors and doing their duty as human beings.”¹⁰

Wilson and his administration (1913–1921) presided over several landmark pieces of legislation, some of which were already underway when he came to office. In 1913, the Sixteenth Amendment to the Constitution established a **federal income tax** and the Internal Revenue Service. Designed to curb the power of the rich and narrow the country’s socioeconomic gap, the federal income tax raised money for various government programs.¹¹ In 1914, Congress established the Federal Trade Commission to closely regulate business practices and passed the Clayton Anti-Trust Act to break up corporate monopolies. The Food and Drug Act of 1906 expanded the Food and Drug Administration. As the government assumed more responsibilities, it created more federal departments and offices and infiltrated more areas of daily life. The government was rapidly fulfilling one of Wilson’s own campaign statements: “the privilege of the government [is] to see that human life is properly cared for and that the human lungs have something to breathe.”¹²



A New Deal

While Wilson's presidency can be considered the first "wave" of American progressivism, a second and greater wave was to come. Wilson's second term in office was complicated by recession, World War I, and his own declining health. He was succeeded by a spate of Republican presidents, and while the economy improved for a time, it imploded in the stock market crash of 1929, which then contributed to the Great Depression. The resulting poverty and unemployment caused the American people to lose a great deal of faith in the free market. Desperate for remedies, they began pleading with national leaders for help.¹³

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In 1932 the Democratic Governor of New York, Franklin D. Roosevelt, ran for president, saying that the time had come for a "re-appraisal of values."¹⁴ Roosevelt blamed the Great Depression on the government's indulgence of special interests, particularly those of the business community. "Should [unrestrained competition] ever use its collective power contrary to public welfare," he claimed, "the Government must be swift to enter and protect the public interest."¹⁵ Roosevelt argued that, "Every man has a right to life, and this means that he has also a right to make a comfortable living."¹⁶

Roosevelt won the election with almost 90 percent of the electoral vote. In office, he began implementing what he called the "New Deal," a series of federal projects meant to rescue the country from recession. Through the New Deal, Roosevelt enabled the federal government to assume responsibilities that exceeded even Progressive Era expectations.

While Progressives had been content for the government to regulate market activity, Roosevelt—who was more of a classic liberal in his beliefs than a Progressive¹⁷—enacted policies to artificially stimulate market growth. He appointed dozens of new boards and agencies to oversee existing industries and to supervise new ones. Under his leadership, the government began to insure bank deposits, supervise the Stock Exchange, restrict competition in various industries, and even fix rates for railroad travel.¹⁸ All of these actions corresponded with Roosevelt's vision for American government: "[T]o help make the system of free enterprise work, to provide that minimum security without which the competitive system cannot function, [and] to restrain the kind of individual action which in the past has been harmful to the community."¹⁹



WORK



WORKS PROGRESS ADMINISTRATION

Perhaps the most significant role assumed by the government during the New Deal was looking after the “social welfare.” According to Roosevelt, the government was responsible for providing the people with “essential human freedoms,” such as freedom from want or fear.²⁰ Accordingly, Roosevelt’s administration invented programs such as the Works Progress Administration (WPA), which hired the unemployed to work on federally funded construction projects. Roosevelt also spearheaded the creation of the social security system as a way of securing insurance for the unemployed, the disadvantaged, and the retired. The system also loaned money to the states to be distributed to the poor.²¹ And while these programs helped some people get back on their feet, they were not temporary—they marked the beginnings of the welfare state, which would grow over time into the enormous system we have today.

Our Freedoms: Dying from Neglect

The government is always moving *forward*—growing in size, scale, and power. It will not restrict or limit itself. In the decades since the New Deal, the American public has departed little from the Progressive mentality that people are “entitled” to government welfare. Today, Americans are being “trained” more than ever—through government-sponsored education, federal programs, and political rhetoric—to look to the government to meet their needs and fix their problems, big or small. Our representatives in Congress are happy to funnel massive amounts of federal funding to their constituents in order to win re-election.

How did we get to this point? By choice. And we will *stay* here if we remain passive and simply take whatever entitlements we can get. What will this generation do? Will we be content to simply sit back, relax, and complain about the sorry state of our society? Or will we do something about it? It is time for another shift in thinking—a shift toward personal responsibility, individual freedom, and service to the community. We need to return to free markets and proper constitutional boundaries. Unless we fight back against the progressive and liberal ideals that have shaped the way we view government, our government will soon no longer be accountable to the people. It is time to fight for a government that is truly “of the people” while we, the people, still have the ability to influence it.

We the People

Endnotes

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