

The Progressive Paradigm & American Politics

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We cannot know history without understanding some of the extensive, underlying threads that weave in and out of its broad tapestry. One thread that has been a constant throughout history is Progressivism, which has manifested in various forms such as conservation, the redistribution of wealth (a.k.a. “Social Justice” or collective salvation), equality (a.k.a. fairness) liberalism, Statism, organized labor, economic interventionism, etc. What is more, the Progressive paradigm has influenced practically every facet of society, including literature, religion, architecture, history, and education. However, the purpose of this essay is to show how Progressivism has transformed American politics.

First, we will cover the ideological differences between America’s Founders and the Progressive playbook; then, we will explore examples of how these Progressive rules have been applied by five particular American presidents.

The Progressive Proposition

The Progressive movement started in America in the late 19th century and has carried on to this day, seeking to answer our economic, political, and cultural questions in light of its faith in equalization, collectivism and government intervention. Progressives believe that the Constitution is a living, breathing document that must “progress” with the times in order to maintain relevance and credibility. Therefore, they contend that America is a democracy rather than a republic – as seen in the 17th Amendment (the direct election of senators), the open primary, etc. – and state that it must provide more revenue through confiscatory taxation, including the universal income tax and its progressive framework.

Progressivism rejects the principles of the American founding and the traditional understanding of justice, while steering Americans toward a new understanding of America. Here are eight points which outline the philosophical differences between America’s Founders and the Progressive doctrine (West):

1. **The Origin of Natural Rights** – The Founders believed that “all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness” (“Declaration”). Progressives believe that people are not born free and that rights are not a gift of God or nature; instead, they view rights as a privilege and a gift and product of the state. For instance, on January 11, 1944,

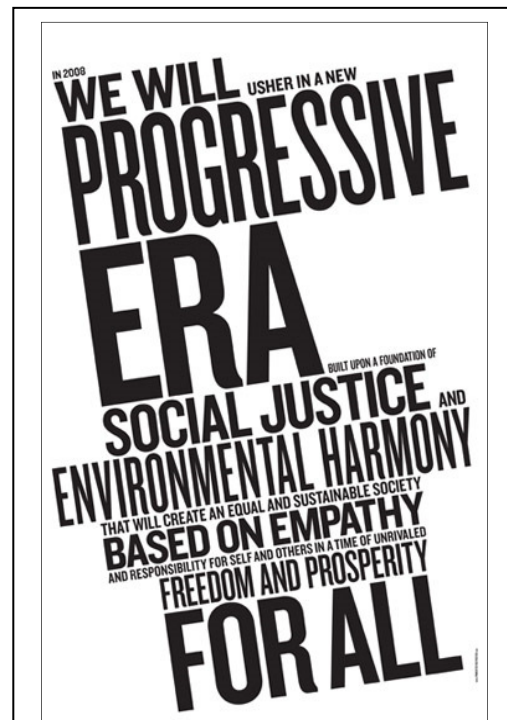


Figure A:

2008 Progressive Era Poster

(Source:

www.parcbench.com/2010/04/18/what-is-the-progressive-movement-why-it-should-be-feared)

President Franklin D. Roosevelt, in his State of the Union address to Congress, said that everyone has “the right to a useful and remunerative job...the right to earn enough to provide adequate food and clothing and recreation...the right of every family to a decent home; the right to adequate medical care and the opportunity to achieve and enjoy good health; the right to adequate protection from the economic fears of old age, sickness, accident, and unemployment, the right to a good education.

All of these rights spell security...human happiness and well-being” (Roosevelt, “State of the Union”). Of course, this confirms the Progressive perspective of rights and liberty as expressed by Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis who said that “rights of property and the liberty of the individual must be remoulded, from time to time, to meet the changing needs of society” (“Middle Articles IV,” 306).

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2. **The Purpose of Government** – The Founders believed that government is needed to protect the liberty and equal, natural rights of the individual – not provide equal distribution of goods – and that it must serve the individual, not the other way around. Progressives believe, as John Dewey wrote, that the government is responsible for creating institutions which will shape individuals and their lives (West), through, for instance, public education, the government regulation of the food industry, government-run health care, etc.
3. **The Social Compact** – The Founders believed that “the body politic 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” (“Constitution of the Commonwealth...”). Progressives, as stated by Charles Merriam, view “the origin of the state...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” (Learner).
4. **The Definition of God** – The Founders, including the nonbelievers, agreed that the God of nature endows men with rights and duties under nature’s law and saw liberty as a “sacred cause” (West). Progressives define God as either “human freedom achieved through the right political organization” or “as a myth” (West).
5. **The Bounds of Government and the Public Sector** – The Founders believed the government was imperfect because humans are imperfect and thus should be limited in its influence upon private spheres. Progressives view the state as divine and the private sector as selfish and oppressive, sometimes referring to themselves as Socialists; hence, as stated by the Progressive political scientist Theodore Woesley, the government should be free to “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” (West). This is echoed by the Progressive political scientist John Burgess who said 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” (West).

6. **Domestic Policy** – The Founders believed that government must protect individuals and their property from third-party abuse, provide the poor with the ability to acquire property, support freedom of religion which bred virtues such as integrity, hard work, personal responsibility, etc. for the happiness of mankind. Progressives believe that government must protect and defend those who are victims of rich people and capitalism by redistributing wealth for the sake of “equality,” “fairness,” “collective salvation,” or “social justice”; it must also, in their view, provide spiritual development for its citizens through environmentalism, state-subsidized education and the promotion of the arts and culture (West).
7. **Foreign Policy** – The Founders considered government as necessary for the defense and security of the people and their property, thereby viewing foreign and domestic policy as serving the same end; they also believed in a strong military and did not view America as a global, democracy-spreading police force, unless it was necessary for national defense. Progressives believe the superior nations should rule the inferior nations (West).
8. **The Nature of Rule** – The Founders believed, as James Madison wrote, that “the goal of every political constitution is, or ought to be, first to obtain for rulers men who possess most wisdom to discern, and most virtue to pursue, the common good of the society” (Hamilton, Madison, and Jay 348). Progressives possess faith in a strong central government led by an enlightened bureaucracy that manages the economy and provides spiritual stability for the people (West).

Progressive Presidents & Policies

Over time, the Progressive ideology has influenced numerous American politicians and their government policies throughout our history. Here are a few examples:

1. **Andrew Jackson** (7th President, 1829-1837; Democrat) was America’s first progressive president. He carried an elitist air about him throughout his administration even though he touted the banner of equality (Schweikart 205-206). Jackson took office as an advocate of state’s rights, but this only applied when it benefited him politically; otherwise, his policies reflected his obsession with a strong central government; in fact, Jackson’s concept of state’s rights, in the end, meant what he said it meant (Schweikart 215). He was an autocrat far more than either of the Adamses before him (Schweikart 205), which is why he often ignored and overrode Congress and the Supreme Court whenever they crossed him on constitutional ground. And yet, at other times, whenever possible, he used Congress as a cloak of legitimacy to pass his unconstitutional policies. Obviously, Jackson wasn’t afraid to violate the Constitution in order to further his progressive agenda.

For instance, his hatred of the Indians drove him to reject Congress and the Supreme Court’s *Worcest v. Georgia* 1832 ruling and to proceed with his arrogant, racist, and murderous treatment of the Cherokee (Trail of Tears), Sauk, Fox, and Seminole Indians (Schweikart 208-209). Though he praised state sovereignty regarding Indian treatment, he proceeded to intervene anyway, discounting Indian rights and stating that the federal government had the authority and duty to relocate the natives whenever it pleased

(Schweikart 208). In the end, “the bureaucracy – and Jackson – was satisfied” (Schweikart 209).

In the same way, Jackson used his executive power – unaccountable to Congress and the Supreme Court – in his political battle against Nicholas Biddle, a private citizen who ran the Bank of the United States (BUS) and posed a threat to Jackson’s political power; he viewed Biddle as an elite catalyst for his political counterparts and thus deemed the BUS as corrupt because it was in the hands of the wrong people (Schweikart 214). Jackson considered the bank evil and once said, “The Bank is trying to kill me. But I will kill it” (Schweikart 216). The bank was displayed an abusive executive branch that scorned the Constitution (Schweikart 216). Moreover, Jackson ordered his Secretary of the Treasury to lay out a plan to design a new, federally-funded national bank that would be run by his party in the federal government (Schweikart 215).

Additionally, Jackson nearly doubled government spending during his tenure, raised real per capita U.S. government expenditures, and, for the first time, a large number of government employees were added to the federal dole; also, he left the executive office with more consolidated power than any previous president, and his progressive agenda foreshadowed FDR’s New Deal and Lyndon Johnson’s Great Society (Schweikart 218). In almost every way, Jackson was the founder of big government in America.

2. **Theodore Roosevelt** (16th President, 1901-1909; Republican) had a weak understanding of capitalism, private enterprise, and the industrial nature of modern America because he inherited his wealth instead of earning it through hard work in the private sector; he also lacked the rugged individualism of a Carnegie and thus “became the most activist president since Andrew Jackson” (Schweikart 475). He was a Social Darwinist who believed in an intellectual hierarchy among men and that “only the ‘best and brightest’ should lead” (Schweikart 476). He believed it was the government’s duty to make corporations serve the public good. Therefore, right after he was elected, he fired off forty lawsuits in order to “trust-bust” and federally control large corporations.

Roosevelt’s crowning achievement was the “Square Deal” which focused on the conservation of natural resources, government control of corporations, and consumer protection. He was the first president to call for Universal Health Care. He also devised the Social Security program.

Another example of his consumer protection agenda is the Hepburn Act of 1906; under this law, the Interstate Commerce Commission was given the power, among other things, to replace existing railroad rates with “just and reasonable” rates, which produced government wage control (Forman). This, of course, depreciated the value of railroad securities which partly caused the Panic of 1907. Then, as a result, Roosevelt created the National Monetary Commission which was the precursor to the Federal Reserve System that came five years later. However, this Panic was not calmed until J.P. Morgan injected pooled public and private funds into the banking matrix.

His vision for America was clearly laid out in 1910 in his landmark speech called “The New Nationalism” where he said he disliked and had “the greatest contempt” for “the wealthy man” whom he would fight in order to defend “the special interest” (Roosevelt, “The New Nationalism”). Later, he said that “It has become entirely clear that we must have government supervision of the capitalization, not only for public service corporations, including, particularly, railways, but of all corporations doing an interstate business... I have no doubt that the ordinary man who has control of them [corporations and companies] is much like ourselves. I have no doubt he would like to do well, but I want to have enough supervision to help him realize that desire to do well...” (Roosevelt, “The New Nationalism”). He went on to say that man should be free to gain fortune as long as it is used to benefit the community, but that this requires “a far more active governmental interference with social and economic conditions in this country than we have yet had, but I think we have got to face the fact that such an increase in governmental control is now necessary...every man holds his property subject to the general right of the community to regulate its use to whatever degree the public welfare may require it” (Roosevelt, “The New Nationalism”).

In Roosevelt’s 1912 “Platform of the Progressive Party,” he pledged “to establish a Department of Labor with a seat in the cabinet, and with wide jurisdiction over matters affecting the conditions of labor and living...to provide a more easy and expeditious method of amending the Federal Constitution...to enact such a Federal law as will tax large inheritances returning to the States an equitable percentage of all amounts collected” (Roosevelt, “Platform...”).

For all these reasons and more “William Howard Taft said that he never met a man “more strongly in favor of strong government” than Roosevelt (Schweikart 476).

3. **Woodrow Wilson** (28th President, 1913-1921; Democrat) believed that human rights do not come from God but government and that the Constitution is a living, breathing document. His Darwinian view of government, as laid out in his 1889 book, *The State*, called for increased government regulation of trade and industry, for regulation of labor, for care of the poor and incapable, and for sumptuary laws (e.g. Prohibition laws); also, as a critic of American innovation and exceptionalism, Wilson called the creation of the automobile by Henry Ford the “new symbol of wealth’s arrogance” (Schweikart 495).

On Wilson’s watch, in reaction to the Panic of 1907, the concept of the Federal Reserve was shaped and developed on a private island called Jekyll Island by a private, elite group that made up approximately one-fourth of all the wealth in the world; this secret meeting in November of 1910 included big players such as Rockefeller, Rothschild, Warburg and J.P. Morgan. In time, Congress passed the Federal Reserve Act of 1913. According to the Federal Reserve’s website, the Fed was founded for the purpose of “...conducting the nation's monetary policy... supervising and regulating banking institutions... maintaining the stability of the financial system...providing financial services to depository institutions, the U.S. government, and foreign official institutions, including playing a major role in operating the nation's payments system” (“Mission”). Clearly, this system has tremendous control over our national economic policy, yet there is basically no

accountability since it can make decisions without the permission of Congress, even though it derives its authority from Congress (Note: Originally, most of Congress opposed its creation); plus, we are not allowed to look into their books. The Fed is a hybrid organizational partnership between the federal government and private banks that is a privately owned banking cartel with no elected officials.

Under Wilson's leadership, the 16th Amendment was ratified in 1913 to create the income tax, which is a plank in the socialist platform mentioned in Karl Marx's *Communist Manifesto*; this allowed Congress to pass a 2 percent tax on everyone making \$4,000 or more (Note: Both the creation of the Federal Reserve and the income tax did more to transform America than any piece of legislation passed anytime thereafter.). Later, the 17th Amendment was ratified to enact the direct election of U.S. Senators by popular vote. Then, in 1919, the 18th Amendment was created to mandate Prohibition, banning the sale, manufacturing, and transportation of alcohol.

Soon after WWI began, Wilson pushed through The Espionage Act of 1917 (prohibiting interference of military affairs) and The Sedition Act of 1918 (prohibiting the willful utterance, printing, writing, or publishing of "disloyal, profane, scurrilous, or abusive language" about the U.S. government, its Constitution, its flag, or its armed forces (United States)); while enforcing these laws, he eventually arrested thousands of people for speaking out against U.S. involvement in WWI.

Finally, Wilson was a driving force in the development of The League of Nations – the precursor to the United Nations – which proved to be irrelevant and ultimately failed.

4. **Franklin Delano Roosevelt** (32nd President, 1933-1945; Democrat) entered the Executive branch in the wake of the Depression which set him up to push through a series of policies that fundamentally transformed the business and welfare foundations of American life. Of course, this led to all-time record deficits, despite FDR's claims of commitment to a balanced budget. Yet, instead of cutting spending, Congress, under FDR's supervision, passed the Revenue Act of 1935 which raised taxes from 59% to 75% on the upper class. As FDR said, "Here is my principle: Taxes shall be levied according to ability to pay. That is the only American principle" (Beck 227).

Of course, The New Deal, which was drafted mostly by Progressive Wisconsinites, was FDR's vehicle for implementing his policies ("Progressivism..."). This agenda was a complex, interlocking set of programs designed to produce relief (e.g. Government-paid, make-work jobs for the unemployed), recovery (of the economy through massive government intervention), and reform (i.e. Regulations on Wall Street, banks, and transportation). The economy improved rapidly from 1933 to 1937, but then went into a deep recession. Government growth exploded in FDR's first one hundred days in office. His New Deal resulted in at least thirty-four new federal agencies, administrations, authorities, and acts (Beck 227). FDR was a strong believer in the theories of English economist John Maynard Keynes whose basic economic hypothesis was that government spending would spur demand and thus pull a nation out of a depression (Schweikart 561). This principle drove Roosevelt's New Deal and yet had failed everywhere it had

previously been tried, which is why his big government solutions actually lengthened the Depression. In fact, his own Treasury Secretary, Henry Morgenthau, admitted in 1939 before the House Ways and Means Committee that The New Deal failed when he said, “We have tried spending money. We are spending more than we have ever spent before and it does not work. And I have just one interest, and now if I am wrong...somebody else can have my job. I want to see this country prosperous. I want to see people get a job. I want to see people get enough to eat. We have never made good on our promises...I say after eight years of this administration, we have just as much unemployment as when we started...And enormous debt to boot” (Beach and McIntyre).

Of course, FDR and the New Dealers, like John Dewey, were convinced “that organized social intelligence could shape society, and some, like [Adolph] Berle, reflected the hope of the Social Gospel of creating the Kingdom of God on earth” (Schweikart 561). However, since FDR knew that the public would not appreciate his large-scale programs as he did, he engaged in secret measures to implement his agendas (Schweikart 562).

In addition, FDR presented the Second Bill of Rights in his January 11 1944 State of the Union message to Congress where he listed eight human rights that must be implemented by the Federal Government in order to establish “a new basis of security and prosperity...for all” (Roosevelt, “State of the Union...”).

Also, there were very few business people among FDR’s advisers because he distrusted them. He considered them stupid and corrupt and thus demonized them at every turn, caring nothing about the class warfare he instilled in the minds of Americans. In the end, all that mattered to FDR was what worked to his political advantage.

Incidentally, FDR was elected four times, which is proof for some that he was one of the best presidents we’ve ever had; however, once he was out of office, we quickly ratified the Twenty-second Amendment, which limited future presidents to two four-year terms.

5. **Lyndon Baines Johnson** (37th President, 1963-1969; Democrat) took government intervention to a whole new level when he promised to lead America to the “Great Society.” On May 7, 1964, President Johnson mentioned the Great Society for the first time at Ohio University in Athens where he said America would work together to build “a Society where no child will go unfed, and no youngster will go unschooled” (Johnson, “Remarks in Athens...”). Then, a few days later, at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, Johnson delivered a speech where he said, “The purpose of protecting the life of our Nation and preserving the liberty of our citizens is to pursue the happiness of our people. Our success in that pursuit is the test of our success as a Nation...We are going to assemble the best thought and broadest knowledge from all over the world to find these answers for America. I intend to establish working groups to prepare a series of White House conferences and meetings—on the cities, on natural beauty, on the quality of education, and on other emerging challenges. And from these meetings and from this inspiration and from these studies, we will begin to set our course toward the Great Society” (Johnson, “Remarks at the University...”). The Great Society was a set of domestic programs created to eliminate poverty and racial injustice. The Great Society

resembled Roosevelt's New Deal but differed sharply in the types of programs enacted. According to LBJ's May 22, 1964 speech at the University of Michigan, the Great Society legislation included laws that upheld governmental intervention in civil rights, public broadcasting, transportation, consumer protection, health care (e.g. Medicare and Medicaid), environmental protection, education, social welfare, employment opportunities, etc.

And when LBJ met opposition to his legislation, he had a notorious, Jacksonian way of coercing politicians, called the "Johnson treatment."

Of course, we could go on to discuss many other presidents, as well as Congressional representatives and senators, who have opened the door to more government involvement in innumerable areas of human life, but the examples are countless.

Conclusion

Since the late 19th century, Progressivism has changed American politics, influencing numerous special interests, politicians and political parties, and it has done so with the greatest intentions. However, good intentions aren't good enough when they contradict and violate the guidelines of the founding documents and principles of the country they are trying to "help." As the British writer-philosopher C.S. Lewis once wrote, "Of all tyrannies, a tyranny sincerely exercised for the good of its victims may be the most oppressive. It would be better to live under robber barons than under omnipotent moral busybodies. The robber baron's cruelty may sometimes sleep, his cupidity may at some point be satiated; but those who torment us for our own good will torment us without end for they do so with the approval of their own conscience" (Levin 22).

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