Croly's progressive America

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No knowledgeable scholar of American political thought would dispute the importance and influence of Herbert Croly's 1909 book *The Promise of American Life*. In the book's own day, Felix Frankfurter extolled it as "the most powerful single contribution to progressive thinking," while Walter Lippmann crowned Croly the "first important [American] political philosopher" of the century. It was the right book at the right time. Not only did it ride the wave of reformist energy that swept American life at the turn of the century, embodied in such towering figures as Theodore Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson, and Robert La Follette, but it also provided the era's scattered reform impulses with a coherent philosophical basis. The book's success offers potent evidence of the enduring power of ideas in history.

Although it sold a piddling 7,500 copies in its heyday, it managed to reach the right readership: the tiny but formidable elite of forward-looking, confident, university-trained students of political institutions and social forces who comprised

the brains and motive force behind the Progressive movement. Among the book's most admiring readers was former President Roosevelt himself, who in 1910, two years before his ill-fated campaign to regain the presidency, wrote to Croly,

> I do not know when I have read a book which I felt profited me as much as your book on American life.... I shall use your ideas freely in speeches I intend to make. I know you won't object to my doing so, because, my dear sir, I can see that your purpose is to do your share in any way for the betterment of our national life.... I want very much to have a chance to talk to you.

Whether Croly's book was a cause or an effect of Roosevelt's New Nationalism, with its vision of a strong central government regulating a highly consolidated economy for the public good, there was an uncanny degree of convergence in the two men's thinking, indicating the extent to which *Promise* captured the *Zeitgeist* in its pages.

Historical significance is one thing and a present-day following is another; and though the book has its admirers, it is hard to find many people today who would testify under oath that they have actually read *The Promise of American Life*. In one sense, this is not surprising. It is an old book, and not easy to get hold of. Its 454 pages contain more than their fair share of ponderous, murky passages. Its leisurely exposition wanders, Mister Magoo fashion, over all the known universe, bumping into or stumbling over such diverse issues as labor unions, specialization, the Philippines question, the reorganization of state governments, municipal corruption, tax policy, and the Australian ballot. Because it was published nine decades ago, many of the issues raised by *Promise*, perhaps inevitably, are no longer of topical interest.

Still, this lumbering book, penned by an obscure and somewhat eccentric editor of an architectural trade magazine—who was later to become founding editor of *The New Republic*—remains worthy of our respectful examination. For one thing, it turns out to be a more interesting and complex book than either its proponents or detractors tell us. And its influence abides. Its fundamental ideas still flow unacknowledged through our national political discourse, permeating the agendas and rhetoric of both political parties. Nowhere else were progressive ideas expressed more powerfully. No book has been more

effective in presenting a vision of what a fully consolidated and nationalized American polity and society might look like, and persuasive in arguing *why* such a transformation was necessary if the essence of America's promise was to be fulfilled. No book was more persuasive in showing how that analysis had to be followed all the way down the scale of social organization to the level of individual consciousness itself. And none contributed more to the fateful redefinition of liberalism in our century, from an ideology of the minimalist, decentralized state into an ideology of the activist, interventionist, and centralized national state.

Means and ends

Croly's book was so successful because it went far beyond merely offering a new political philosophy or a collection of novel policy suggestions. It did both those things, but it also gave vitality and plausibility to that philosophy and those ideas by folding them into a narrative. It presented its assertions and prescriptions as elements in a striking retelling of the story of America. The United States was founded, Croly argued, upon three not entirely compatible tenets: a belief in the virtues of pioneer individualism, a strong commitment to limited government (especially a limited central government), and an unflagging confidence in a national ideal that he dubbed "the Promise of American life," by which he meant the steady advance of democratic values and gradual amelioration of social and economic disparities. Much of our subsequent history, in his view, can be explained as a jostling for supremacy among these three principles, a conflict that has repeatedly jeopardized the Promise of American life.

In the early years of American history, it was naïvely assumed that the Promise would fulfill itself, and that the three tenets need not come into conflict. In fact, it might have seemed that they were complementary, since encouraging settlement by pioneers, unhindered by the dictates of government, seemed indispensable for realizing the nation's material promise. But from the young nation's very beginning, and certainly as early on as the Federalist-Republican debates, there had always been disagreements over which of the tenets to emphasize. One camp subordinated all else to the pursuit of the

Promise, believing that more vigorous leadership and a more disciplined way of life would be necessary to sustain the possibility of American "national fulfillment." The other camp, which followed the path of "national distraction," was more backward-looking, willing to preserve the virtues of individualism and limited government at all cost, even if doing so came at the expense of the Promise.

Such divisions were present even before the creation of the nation, but did not fully emerge until the Washington administration. The emblematic political figures embodying these conflicting principles were Alexander Hamilton and Thomas Jefferson. Croly did not disguise his preference for the former's political philosophy. He did, however, acknowledge that each faction possessed some portion of the truth, and that a felicitous combination of the two, mixed in the proper proportions—more Hamiltonian than Jeffersonian, of course—was necessary to achieve the optimal form of democratic government. This had been true from the founding, but it became particularly true under the conditions of modern social and industrial life, in which the rise of giant business corporations and massive disparities in wealth threatened to overwhelm the Promise entirely. Under such circumstances, America had no choice but to abandon its outmoded commitment to pioneer individualism and limited government. For Croly, this meant embracing an expanded and activist central government, a government that would use, as he put it, in what are perhaps the book's best-known words, "Hamiltonian means" (a vigorous national government) to achieve "Jeffersonian ends" (the preservation of democratic values).

By putting it this way, Croly was arguing that the deepest meaning of American history had not changed. The means would change, but the end would not. America was still about the Promise, and the Promise had remained the same. But because the circumstances of modern American life had changed so dramatically, any effective pursuit of the Promise would have to be undertaken differently. Far from being a byproduct of the pursuit of individual well-being, or the gift of a providential destiny, the Promise now had to be conceived of as an ideal goal. All Americans now had to dedicate themselves to, and actively pursue, the transcendent national purpose of de-

mocracy and social progress. That was what the Promise had been all along, Croly argued. But we now realized it would not be fulfilled unless we worked at it very hard, submerging selfish interests for the sake of a larger collective goal.

Heroes and villains

American political history unfolded with a succession of heroes and villains, who fell into the parallel traditions initiated by Hamilton and Jefferson in the nation's first years. This observation about American history was nothing new, but Croly's assessment of the relative merits of the two traditions differed strikingly from the conventional wisdom. Liberal historians had reviled Hamilton as a closet monarchist and exalted Jefferson as the friend of the common man. The Constitution itself would be cast by Progressive historians as a counter-revolutionary document, which sought to suppress the radical popular democracy unleashed by the American Revolution and to reestablish the authority of hegemonic elites. Not so for Croly. Instead, he thought that the Constitution was far superior to the alternatives and indispensable to the movement toward national cohesion. He also believed Hamilton to be, without doubt, the "finer" man and "sounder" intellect. By endorsing the ideas and institutions necessary to the development of a strong central government, Hamilton set America on the path toward a "constructive" nationalism.

Croly regarded Jefferson, on the other hand, as an "amiable enthusiast" at best, and a dangerous purveyor of "intellectual superficiality and insincerity" at worst. In Croly's view, Jefferson had an impoverished definition of democracy, which was "tantamount to extreme individualism," designed merely for "the greatest satisfaction of its individual members," and not for any larger, collective goal. The net effect of his political ideas was "negative and fatalistic ... the old fatal policy of drift." Fortunately, Jefferson's triumph in the election of 1800 did not lead to the dismantling of the Federal structure Hamilton had created. But it did lead to a stagnant "alliance" between Federalist and democratic principles, a standoff that ensured no further progress would be made in favor of a national ideal. Subsequent national leaders would then feel compelled to pay obeisance to antiquated ideas.

Take Andrew Jackson, for example, who was an unmitigated disaster so far as Croly was concerned. Not only did Jackson destroy one of the great Hamiltonian national institutions—the Bank of the United States—but he destroyed an honest class of skilled and conscientious public officials by introducing the "spoils system" into civil service. The popular orators of "Jacksonian democracy" followed a similar line, mouthing a crude individualism that "had not the remotest conception" of a "gallant and exclusive devotion to some disinterested, and perhaps unpopular moral, intellectual, or technical purpose." Senator Stephen A. Douglas also represented this tradition by championing the antinational concept of "popular sovereignty," a notion that made democracy equivalent to "national incoherence and irresponsibility." More recently, William Jennings Bryan had arisen, a man born "too late," whose antique Jacksonian and antinationalist prejudices included "dislike of organization and of the faith in expert skill, in specialized training, and in large personal opportunities and responsibilities which are implied by a trust in organization." Such backwardness "disqualified him for effective leadership of the party of reform."

As is so often the case, the list of villains was longer and more colorful than the list of heroes. That was especially inevitable for Croly, for although he deplored the populistic and antinational conceptions of democracy that held so many Americans in their grip, he was not led to advocate the overt elitism of the Federalists and their successors. He was too much of a democrat at heart for that. Instead, he sought examples of vigorous, enlightened leadership that self-consciously advanced the Promise, and such examples were few and far between. Indeed, in the desert of post-Jeffersonian nineteenth-century statesmanship, only the extraordinary figure of Abraham Lincoln, the nationalist-savior par excellence, graced an otherwise barren landscape. In his debates with Douglas, Lincoln sought to demonstrate that the *national* ideal was also the highest expression of the *democratic* ideal, which was precisely Croly's conviction as well. Although Lincoln was a man of simple, provincial origins, hailing from the prairie West, he demonstrated by his personal example how the triumph of a national ideal would inexorably lead to more expansive sympathies and

refined sensibilities. He was "an example of high and disinterested intellectual culture," a man who had "made for himself a second nature, compact of insight and loving-kindness," which led him to become a martyr to the greatest of national purposes.

But there was only one Lincoln, and Croly's contemporaries did not offer much by way of comparable inspiration. The most hopeful figure on the horizon was a vigorous nationalist from Lincoln's party, and Croly's soon-to-be admirer, Theodore Roosevelt, who had already expressed his view that reform had to be linked to "the national idea." Although Croly conceded that Roosevelt's accomplishments were rather limited thus far, the potential for greatness was evident. He could imagine Roosevelt as a "Thor wielding with power and effect a sledge-hammer in the cause of national righteousness."

By proposing to use the national government to make America "a more complete democracy in organization and practice," Roosevelt was promoting Croly's philosophy, showing the requisite devotion to both national and democratic ideals. Like Croly, he believed the movement toward concentration in industry was both inexorable and potentially beneficial, so long as government responded with a vigorous program of centralized regulation, rather than crude and wanton trust-busting. In stark contrast to the Jeffersonian-Jacksonian-Bryanite hostility to scientifically trained experts, Roosevelt favored such men. He would place them in public office and provide them with the administrative power and machinery they needed to regulate and rationalize. It would be through the success of such initiatives, believed Croly, that the future of the Promise would be made safe.

Disinterested individuality

Such was Croly's vision of American history. He saw a slow, groping progress from a disorganized and decentralized form of laissez-faire individualism to an organized and socialized form of disciplined nationhood. Fueled by steady pursuit of the Promise, the movement would succeed once the virtues of pioneering independence were superseded by the virtues of social solidarity and "disinterested" knowledge. One should take note of Croly's repeated use of the word "disinterested,"

a word Progressive reformers could hardly have done without. It is doubtless a fact of great significance that this word's meaning is almost completely lost upon our more jaded age, in which it is nearly always used, incorrectly, as a synonym for "uninterested." For Progressives, however, the word carried strong ethical implications, pointing toward an extraordinarily high standard of unselfish, reasonable, ascetic, scientific, and impersonal judgment—a disposition that always placed the public interest above all other considerations. It was deployed in opposition to the noun *interest*—often rendered, far more ominously, as *The Interests*—which stood not only for such mammoth corporate powers as U.S. Steel and Standard Oil but for all that was corrupting about the "trusts" and pressure groups dominating modern industrial America. If "disinterestedness" stood for the unsullied and impartial intellect that Croly's nationalism would require, "The Interests" stood for everything that would destroy the nation and its Promise.

For Croly, the need for national organization went beyond economic considerations to affect individuals' very souls. Even if laissez-faire economics had resulted in economic equality, it would still be wrong. "The popular enjoyment of practically unrestricted economic opportunities," Croly declared, "is precisely the condition which makes for individual bondage." The system of free enterprise compromised men in their successes as much as their failures. It reduced them to a common mold of acquisitiveness and denied them a life of fully realized *individuality*, as opposed to a pathological individualism. "The truth," Croly contended, "is that individuality cannot be dissociated from the pursuit of a disinterested object"—an object that is sought wholeheartedly, selflessly, and altruistically, rather than as a means to something else. A disinterested achievement has "unequivocal social value," because its pursuit reunites the solitary individual with his fellows. Competitive capitalism, on the other hand, imprisons him in his pinched solitude. The larger the object of disinterested labor, the more admirable the results; and the largest of all pursuits are those undertaken for the sake of the nation. Hence the true liberation of the individual will come only with the realization of the national ideal.

Thus *Promise* was a brief for national consolidation, the

amelioration of sectional antagonisms, and the full-scale reorganization of state and local authority. The cultivation of a firmly rooted national identity was the key to all good things: "No permanent good can come to the individual and society except through the preservation and development of the existing system of nationalized states." Croly was concerned about the problem of what we might today call "atomization," the creation of a "vast incoherent mass of the American people," disconnected from all formerly essential sources of social meaning. But he felt certain that the creation of "a conscious social ideal" on a national scale could prevent such sources of conflict, taking the place of older, more instinctive affinities and affiliations. He was convinced that the nation, far from being too large and abstract an object to fulfill the quest for community, would elevate and transform local sentiments in the very process of eliciting them. A "national community" would enlarge citizens' hearts by enlarging the scope of their affections and affinities.

Ultimately, this social ideal would metamorphose into an object of faith, binding the nation together in a Rousseauean civil religion built upon human brotherhood. Here Croly showed his abiding debt to the ideals of his father, David, a devotee of Auguste Comte's religion of humanity. Yet there were older moral and religious sentiments involved too. Croly understood that the maintenance of his social ideal would demand strenuous discipline and continuous moral effort. It is no coincidence that, in the book's final paragraph, he approvingly cites Montesquieu's saying that "the principle of democracy is virtue" and concludes by calling on the people of America to imitate the lives of "heroes and saints," even to the point of serving as heroic and saintly exemplars themselves. The lure of self-denying republican virtue and religious asceticism was immensely strong for him since they were inseparable from his hopes for the national ideal. Perhaps most stunningly, Croly asserts that

> democracy must stand or fall on a platform of possible human perfectibility. If human nature cannot be improved by institutions, democracy is at best a more than usually safe form of political organization; and the only interesting inquiry about its future would be: How long will it continue to work?

In the end, faith in the Promise was more than faith in steady improvement; it meant faith in the possibility of earthly perfection, of the Kingdom of God established here below.

Inflated expectations

Such a faith was characteristic of many Progressive reformers who had been deeply affected by the optimistic Social Gospel teachings of Washington Gladden and Walter Rauschenbusch. It mingled a vestigial liberal-Protestant understanding of sin and redemption with the can-do outlook of reformist social science. But such a view could not have been more different than the one taken by the Framers of the Constitution, who most emphatically did not believe in the malleability of human nature, the possibility of sustained disinterestedness, the ease of maintaining a virtuous citizenry, or even in democracy itself *per se*. They too were profoundly concerned about the problem of interest. But they regarded it as a given that one had to devise structures to channel its effects, rather than stake everything on the possibility of eliminating its causes.

Croly had a far more ambitious, and far less realistic, understanding of the problem than the Framers. In this respect, he typifies one of the most striking paradoxes of Progressive thought, which prided itself on its clever, jaundiced, historicist, unillusioned analysis of the Founding and the Constitution, but sought to restore the semblance of republican virtue and public-spiritedness through reconstructions of political society based upon just such corrosive analyses. One might venture to say that they pursued Aristotelian ends by Machiavellian means—an ambition that is too clever by half and bound to fail. They deconstructed the rhetoric and structure of the Constitution into a tawdry tangle of interest, calculation, and improvisation. But then they turned around and expected the citizenry could, with the right tutelage, be remade into disinterested servants of a high national ideal and a glorious national purpose. They fancied that a people's reverence is a fungible quantity, which could be debunked in one place in order to be transferred to a more worthy object. A more self-delusive strategy would be difficult to imagine.

Croly himself was fairly restrained in writing about the

Constitution in *Promise*. He saw the document as an important step along the road to nationalization, and while clearly flawed and outdated, good enough for practical purposes for the time being. Although he deplored the tendency to regard the Constitution with "superstitious awe," he believed that wholesale constitutional revision was not worth attempting. Yet, in his Godkin Lectures at Harvard in 1913, which would be published as *Progressive Democracy* (1914), he went much further, rendering the dichotomies of American political thought in a rather different way. From the Revolution onward, he argued, America had been divided between two political tendencies: one willing to place ultimate faith in the wisdom of the people, and one that could not, preferring to rely upon the formal restraints and safeguards embodied in the Constitution. Croly thought it was time to discard the artificiality, proceduralism, and pessimism of the latter, and embrace the freshness and optimism of the former. He now saw the matter in terms of the old Christian dichotomy of spirit and law: A genuine democracy would affirm the living spirit of the people and open the way to everlasting progress, while a fearful society would cling to the false security of inert legalisms, adopting unchanging rules and laws as if they were "sacred words ... deposited in the ark of the covenant." The former kept alive hope for fulfillment of the Promise. The latter suppressed it with the dead hand of formalism.

Ironically, such a view of the Constitution directly echoed the words of Jefferson, who, notwithstanding his strict constructionism, mocked those "who look at constitutions with sanctimonious reverence, and deem them like the ark of the covenant," and who "ascribe to the preceding age a wisdom more than human." Both men preferred a frankly instrumental and contingent view of the Constitution, which was to be a mere document that should be held lightly, made readily adaptable to other ends, and ignored or worked around when it was necessary to do so. Such a view has prevailed ever since among historians and legal scholars—except on those rare occasions when they find it opportune to cite the Framer's original intentions.

But Croly's un-Jeffersonian paeans to the national idea have fared less well. They now seem ludicrously inflated, even for

those who accept the view that, for most purposes, social and economic problems are best addressed at the national level. The incantatory power of the idea of the nation has been withering away, precisely because it could not bear the weight of excessive expectation with which Croly freighted it. What Robert Nisbet observed almost 50 years ago, in *The Quest for Community*, remains truer than ever: The nation cannot be a community, and those who seek to make it one are doomed to fail, often in ways that are profoundly damaging and corrupting both to the nation itself and to other, more genuine forms of human association. This does not mean that there is no need for a national government and no possibility of legitimate and healthy bonds forming among its citizens. It merely means that the proper scope of each level and kind of human association has to be understood and its limits observed. It undermines the nation just as surely to expect too much from it as it does to expect too little.

The meaning of national purpose

On that count, the Framers look better and better as time goes on—and not only for their realism about human nature. For it was precisely the problem of dividing and disbursing authority, and of demarcating the scope of its respective spheres, that they addressed with such great ingenuity in the Constitution. They were not under the illusion that a total consolidation of power on the national scale was desirable, even if it were possible. Instead, they attempted to mix the respective scales of political organization and balance the possibilities of both federal and national governments in one complex constitutional republic. Progressives found the results of this effort exasperating and unworkable, a relic of eighteenth-century thinking that stood in the way of the vigorous and intelligent national executive authority they cherished.

Progressives and their successors have done much to dismantle that older structure and suppress the signals it once sent. But increasingly it is they, and not the Framers, whose ideas appear hopelessly outdated. The Framers' supple structure anticipated and addressed, on a smaller scale, what will almost certainly be one of the central political problems facing the world of the next century: how to manage the inexo-

rable and growing tension between an increasingly consolidated and globalized world economy, on the one hand, and the rising demands for the preservation of national independence and local autonomy on the other. The growth of the former will only intensify the political and cultural growth of the latter. We live in a world that is simultaneously both consolidating and disaggregating, and those who would stabilize and manage this dizzying, contradictory condition will have to revive the federal idea, in some form or another. They will not need to "reinvent" American government—they will need to rediscover it.

In fairness to Croly, his understanding of subnational levels of organization, as reflected in *Promise*, was far more subtle and suggestive, if also more sketchy, than that offered by many of his Progressive brethren. Although the book is highly critical (and not without reason) of existing state governments and makes detailed recommendations for their reorganization (including many egregiously bad or unworkable propositions), it continues to affirm their utility and their proper role. Croly insisted in no uncertain terms, in his chapter entitled "Nationality and Centralization," that centralization and nationalization were not necessarily the same thing, and the elimination of state and local institutions would be "absurd."

Croly argued that nationalization should be understood as "a formative and enlightening political transformation," in which a people's "political, social, and economic organization or policy is being coordinated with their actual needs and their moral and political ideals." Nationhood, then, arose out of unity of purpose, rather than unity of organization. Such unity could be put into effect in a variety of ways, under a variety of governmental arrangements. While America clearly needed more centralization, he warned that centralization which proceeded mechanically, without reference to any such larger motive, might actually impede nationalization, precisely because it would substitute procedure for purpose. One can well imagine that Croly would have looked with favor on the slogan, "Think Globally, Act Locally," since it suggests that the centrality of the global *idea* is more important than centralized control of the *institutions* through which that idea is expressed.

Croly put forward a much more powerful and interesting

idea than that offered by top-down consolidationists. Yet the Framers' understanding was superior to both. They had a less demanding, but more realistic and liberal, understanding of the meaning of national purpose. They understood that while all nations need to have unifying objectives and strong central governments to embody and express them, the profoundest of these objectives is an oblique one: to serve as a protective container for other, more particular human ends and goals, which are best pursued in a multitude of disparate communities. For Croly, on the other hand, the true national purpose, the only purpose truly worthy of the nation, was the pursuit of the Promise—that shimmering, alluring goal ever yet to be reached, toward which a national army of disinterested souls was earnestly marching. The idea of the American nation as an intermediate container for aspirations beyond its own scope could never have satisfied his craving for redemptive unity. Anything short of that goal settled for imperfection, betraying the Promise.

Promises, promises

There are several senses of the word "promise," and Croly seemed to have been thinking of only one of them. The unseasoned training-camp rookie, the unrun thoroughbred, the uncleared and uncultivated land, the unset gem: these are examples of Croly's sense of promise, the unfulfilled potential of a marvelous but undeveloped or untested thing, of which much is hoped or expected. This kind of promise is a quality that inheres in the "promising" object itself. No one could have ever assured America that "if you do this, you will receive that," just as no one can assure that the promising rookie will live up to his promise. Such promise, in Croly's sense of the word, is neither destiny nor divine covenant. In fact, part of the point of calling it a "promise" is precisely to underscore the possibility that it might go unfulfilled.

This, however, is a derivative meaning of the word "promise." More fundamentally, a promise is something "sent forward," an agreement, a covenant, a contract—a solemn vow to do or not to do something. In this sense, something is promising because someone made a promise regarding it. The religious tradition upon which Croly drew understands God as a

maker of promises. And that tradition's version of the human story is punctuated with promises: the Promise to Noah, the Promised Land of Canaan, the promised Messiah, the promised Second Coming of Christ. Such promises, like all the Biblical covenants, committed humanity to a range of reciprocal obligations. The same dynamic holds for secular promises, whether courtroom oaths, marriage vows, business contracts, or New Year's resolutions. A promise is a set of agreed-upon words that are taken to guide and hold authority over the course of future actions. In a republican regime, one could say that the law itself is a kind of promise, insofar as it is the mechanism through which a self-governing people makes mutual commitments and governs itself.

Indeed, once ratified, the U.S. Constitution became a kind of promise, a solemn meta-promise enacted by all the relevant parties, mutually committing themselves to abide in perpetuity by certain structures of governance—including the means by which those structures might be amended—and staking success in the national undertaking on their faithfulness in observing the terms of the promise. It is the Constitution itself that best deserves to be called the Promise of American life, both because it was the central promise of our national history, and because it has made it possible for a "promising" nation to live up to much of its promise.

To the Constitution

So we have two different meanings attached to the Promise of American life, and it makes all the difference in the world which we choose. Do we opt for Croly's sense of the Promise as a vast opportunity to transform the human condition and bring into being the New Jerusalem on the American strand? Or do we accept the Founders' more skeptical vision of human nature?

In pondering these questions, one might consider the way that Americans are instinctively drawn, during moments of domestic crisis and uncertainty, to political leaders known for their genuine reverence for the Constitution. Such leaders command our respectful attention, irrespective of party affiliation, precisely because they associate themselves so strongly with the spirit of the Constitution. Of course, it is equally

true that Americans, like everyone else, have at times been drawn in the opposite direction, to the charismatic leader, the Theodore or Franklin Delano Roosevelt, who embodies the national government and personifies the national will, even if in the process he inevitably shows precious little regard for the niceties of constitutionalism. But surely if there is one thing the politics of this bloody century ought to have taught us, it is the danger of wishing to be ruled by myth-sized savior-leaders, and the pervasive dishonesty and fakery that inevitably flow from the false personification of high office. There was a mature sobriety in the eighteenth century's distrust of executive power, a sobriety that makes even more sense in an era dominated by spin-doctoring and media-magnified cults of personality.

Reverence for the Constitution remains our most reliable touchstone. None but a fool would trust today, as the Progressives did, in the disinterestedness of experts, the perspicacity of social reformers, or the truthfulness of presidents. Many more of us are inclined, in the final analysis, to trust in the disinterestedness of the Constitution, battered and bowdlerized though it be. That is why even the highly partisan legal scholars and historians who testified against President Clinton's impeachment felt compelled to do so in the name of the Constitution and of the original intentions of the Framers. It was an argumentative strategy that one can safely predict they would have roundly ridiculed in an academic setting but that they did not hesitate to employ in a public one. They were smart to do so. Their claims to expertise fell embarrassingly flat and impressed no one. But their instinct to move the discussion toward the Constitution, and to root their arguments in it, was more effective. It showed where the balance wheel of broad public authority is still to be found in this country.

The Constitution remains the shelter to which we all ultimately repair in our public life, precisely because it remains our principal anchor of legitimacy, one that neither the promise of expertise nor the promise of an earthly paradise can match. For a fanciful Promise wistfully sought is very different from a solemn Promise faithfully kept, just as a junk bond is different from a Treasury bill. Croly's understanding of the

Promise, despite its many generous, intelligent, and visionary qualities, failed to take account of that. What Macaulay said wrongly of the U.S. Constitution could be said rightly of Crolyan progressivism: It was all sail and no anchor. And today, that drifting vessel can no longer even claim the wind at its back. Those who still embrace it communicate their shared sentiments through occult signs and secret handshakes, publicly averring that "the era of big government is over" while crossing their fingers behind their backs. It's a good enough tactic for the short run but bad strategy for the duration.