

The Progressive Bridge: Reform Sentiment in the United States between the New Freedom and the New Deal

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In the history of the reform heritage of the American people the Progressive Era has loomed large. Here was a reform drive which operated on all levels of government, included large segments of both major parties as well as the most important third party movement in this century, and introduced significant reforms in the social and economic realms as well as the political world. The movement included most of the familiar names of the pre-World War I era—Theodore Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson, Robert M. La Follette, Albert J. Beveridge, Charles Evans Hughes, and George W. Norris—and created so favorable a climate of opinion that such diverse figures as William Howard Taft and Eugene V. Debs both claimed to be progressives.

The Progressive Movement had several unusual aspects in contrast to other reform eras. Progressivism thrived during an era of prosperity. The movement developed under intellectual leadership and claimed the support of farmers, trade unionists, the small business middle class, and even an occasional millionaire. It had many faces which varied according to the time or geographical location as well as the leader. Progressivism was also relatively free from the rancor which has characterized other liberal reform drives. There was none of the hostile desperation which marked the internal upheaval during the American Revolution; one fails to find the bitter moral recriminations of the antislavery crusade that dominated the fervor of reform of the Jacksonian Era; nor does one find any of the gloom, pessimism, and sense of crisis which ushered in the New Deal. This is not to say that the progressives were not sincere or that their leaders were not hard-hitting champions of the cause; but Progressivism was moderate, its leaders were accepted and

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respected, and most of them did not feel that time was so short as to necessitate a crash program.¹

In general the progressive was a planner. He advocated expansion of government for general social welfare, for economic opportunity, and for political democracy. He had shifted his views from the Jeffersonian philosophy of "liberty against government" to Theodore Roosevelt's New Nationalism concept of "liberty through government" in order to control big business and big labor. Essentially he was a pragmatist, ready to accept a mixed economy if it could advance the general welfare. He saw nothing incompatible between the federal postal system, the Panama Canal, or indeed the Tennessee Valley Authority, and the capitalistic free enterprise system. He was optimistic, confident, and certain that the future belonged to democracy, and that the "cure for the ills of democracy was more democracy."²

If these generalizations have any validity, the question immediately arises, what happened to the Progressive Movement? Why was such a reform drive, seemingly so well-equipped with leaders, amply supplied with issues, and buttressed with an optimistic liberal philosophy, so short-lived? The traditional assignment of dates for the Progressive Movement places it generally between 1901 and 1917, barely more than a decade and a half. As the latter date also denotes America's entrance into World War I, the question is frequently asked in its balder form: "Did the war kill the Progressive Movement?" Admittedly, the war shattered the progressive organization, destroyed a part of the progressive leadership, and left the progressive rank and file wandering in the wilderness, confused concerning causes and goals for the better part of a decade. It is the purpose of this paper to examine the breakup of the progressive coalition, to trace the con-

¹ For conflicting interpretations of Progressivism see Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform: From Bryan to F.D.R.* (New York, 1955), 155ff; Norman Pollack, "Hofstadter on Populism: A Critique of the 'Age of Reform,'" *The Journal of Southern History*, XXVI (November, 1960), 478-500; C. Vann Woodward, "The Populist Heritage and the Intellectual," *The American Scholar*, XXIX (Winter, 1959-60), 55-72; and Arthur Mann (ed.), *The Progressive Era: Liberal Renaissance or Liberal Failure?* (New York, 1963).

² George E. Mowry, *The Era of Theodore Roosevelt, 1900-1912* (New York, 1958), 85-105; Robert S. Maxwell, *La Follette and the Rise of the Progressives in Wisconsin* (Madison, 1956), 4-5; George E. Mowry, *The California Progressives* (Berkeley, 1951), ix, 86-104.

tinued progressive reform activity that may be evident during the twenties, and to note the role of progressive leaders and issues among the sources of the New Deal. If these are substantial, it would indicate the existence of a "bridge" between the reform eras of the Progressive Movement and the New Deal.

As Wilson scholar Arthur S. Link has suggested, there were several causes for the decline of the progressive reform drive. First, the progressive elements were never able to create or gain permanent control of a political organization capable of carrying them into national office. Instead they were forced to rely on temporary combinations which would allow them to dominate one of the major parties such as the Republican party in 1904 or the Democratic party in 1916. The effort to create a Progressive party in 1912 had been short-lived and had by no means attracted all the progressives into its ranks. This lack of a political vehicle continued through the twenties with the Republican party patently impossible for progressive purposes, the third party movement of 1924 doomed to failure because of national prosperity and inertia, and the Democratic party so torn by internal strife that it almost ceased to be a national party. Second, the tensions which had wrecked the progressive coalition of 1916 not only persisted but grew during the twenties. The alliance between farmers and organized labor broke up. The rural-urban split often left these two groups more opposed to each other than to their erstwhile foes. Third, these tension-ridden reformers were never able to agree on a program that could form the basis of an effective revival. Some intellectuals repudiated progressive ideals, and many of the urban middle class defected, thoroughly frightened by the aftermath of the war. Fourth, for a time the progressives suffered from a lack of effective leadership. The twenties, with its climate of contentment, materialism, and prosperity was an unpropitious time to launch a new progressive crusade. Many of the old leaders were still on the scene, and the younger generation who had served its apprenticeship under Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson had not yet emerged. These reasons help explain the decline of Progressivism after the war, but they do not adequately provide a clue for the continuing reform sentiment evident during

the twenties nor the remarkable resurgence of the progressive temper in the early thirties.³

Perhaps more should be said about the nature of the progressive split. The progressive leadership differed violently over the issue of the war itself. Theodore Roosevelt would have entered the war enthusiastically and early; Wilson entered reluctantly and at the eleventh hour; La Follette and Norris would have remained neutral. Even after war had been declared, the methods of prosecuting it divided still other progressives. By some strange alchemy of public opinion, both pro-war, pro-league Wilson and anti-war, anti-league La Follette were discredited for a time during the twenties. The orthodox and preferred position seemed to be the pro-war, weak-league (really anti-league) stance which had characterized Henry Cabot Lodge and the bulk of the conservative Republicans. Until the wounds made by this issue had healed, no regrouping of progressives was possible.

Wilson's home front policies engendered deep antagonisms among many progressive supporters. Such measures as the espionage and sedition acts; his winking at the atrocities of the vigilante mobs that harassed first, second, and even third generation immigrant families under the guise of patriotism; and his partisan call for a Democratic Congress in 1918 alienated large segments of the population. Men who had enthusiastically voted for Wilson in 1912 and 1916 became so broodingly hostile that his name became anathema to them. The war became Wilson's war, the treaty Wilson's treaty, and the league Wilson's league. The shortcomings of the Versailles Treaty and the mismanagement of the campaign for the League of Nations in the United States (to say nothing of the Red Scare activities of Wilson's attorney general) foredoomed the Democratic party as a vehicle of reform in the immediate postwar years. Wilson's physical collapse, the evidences of his increased rigidity in the months that followed, and his "dog in the manger" attitude preceding the Democratic convention of 1920 only completed the debacle.⁴

³ Arthur S. Link, "What Happened to the Progressive Movement in the 1920's?" *American Historical Review*, LXIV (July, 1959), 833-51.

⁴ Robert S. Maxwell, *Emanuel L. Philipp, Wisconsin Stalwart* (Madison, 1959), 163-80; H. C. Peterson and Gilbert C. Fite, *Opponents of War, 1917-1918* (Norman, Okla., 1957), 73-80, 285-96.

Perhaps the very successes which Progressivism enjoyed prior to 1917 help explain its subsequent decline. The initial reforms on the state level proposed by such leaders as La Follette, Hughes, Joseph Folk, Albert Cummins, and Hiram Johnson had largely been written into law. Such accomplishments as the direct primary, effective railroad commissions, reform of the state tax structure, regulation of big business, labor legislation, water power and conservation programs, and corrupt practices laws had exhausted the reform zeal of the moderate progressive. When one adds the reforms which characterized the Square Deal and the New Freedom on the national level and the concerted drive for improved education which was a hallmark of Progressivism in the South, the list of innovations was indeed long, and many men of liberal and reasonable persuasion were willing to see how the new reforms worked before launching out on new crusades.⁵

This is not to intimate that the progressive program was complete. Albert J. Beveridge of Indiana, for example, carried on a long and frustrating fight to ban child labor from American industry. But not for another generation would the public and the courts accept this much needed reform. La Follette and other advanced progressive leaders raised new issues and proposed new reforms which were oriented to the increasing urbanization of American society. From a large part of the American people these new calls brought forth only a limited response. Perhaps a period of pause and consolidation was needed.⁶

Not all of the progressive reforms were either wise or successful. An outstanding case in point was the prohibition crusade. From the turn of the century prohibition had been a popular progressive issue, particularly in the South and West. Reformers had pushed prohibition at the county level on the basis of local option; they had urged state prohibition upon the legislatures and had finally achieved success in the

⁵ Mowry, *The California Progressives*, 135-157; Maxwell, *La Follette and the Rise of the Progressives in Wisconsin*, 40-172; Lincoln Steffens, *Autobiography of Lincoln Steffens* (New York, 1931), 631ff; Dewey W. Grantham, Jr., *Hoke Smith and the Politics of the New South* (Baton Rouge, 1958).

⁶ Claude G. Bowers, *Beveridge and the Progressive Era* (New York, 1932), 250-55; Belle Case La Follette and Fola La Follette, *Robert M. La Follette: June 14, 1855-June 18, 1925* (2 vols., New York, 1953), I, 444-505.

entire country with national prohibition backed by a "bone-dry" enforcement law at the end of the war. The entire prohibition issue soon split the remaining progressive forces. Though there had been twenty-two states dry by their own action prior to 1917, the reaction in them had given no clue which could have anticipated the rise of the bootleggers or the organization of gangster syndicates that often superseded the elected law enforcement officers of a city. Nor could prohibition advocates have foreseen the shabby enforcement policies of the Harding administration and the lethargy of the states. Die-hard supporters of prohibition and other progressives who were ready to scrap the "noble experiment" early in the twenties split on this issue to the exclusion of all else. The tensions and friction engendered by prohibition kept progressives in all parts of the country mutually hostile and largely prevented any coalition on other issues. Not until the end of the decade did a majority of liberal and progressive-minded citizens, interested in social reform and good government, agree that the prohibition experiment had been a failure and should be scrapped. Even then repeal had to await a new administration.⁷

An excellent case can be made that Warren G. Harding was merely a political accident and that his election did not necessarily denote the demise of the progressive spirit. In Chicago, Harding had been merely a favorite son candidate who perhaps privately hoped for the vice-presidency. It would have taken no strange turn of events for the Republican nominee to have been Frank Lowden of Illinois or Hiram Johnson of California. Both were progressives. Had this occurred the campaign for the presidency in 1920 might have been between two progressive-minded midwestern governors with similar philosophies and programs: Lowden and James M. Cox of Ohio. Likewise, Coolidge was something of a political accident. He had gained popularity in the convention by an offhand remark on the Boston police strike and succeeded to the White House at the death of Harding. In 1924 the Republican managers had no choice but to give Coolidge a chance to win a presidential term in his own right. One cannot, obviously, predict what the course of American history

⁷ Andrew Sinclair, *Prohibition: The Era of Excess* (Boston, 1962), 152-77, 369-410.

would have been had a candidate such as Lowden been nominated and elected in 1920. But one can be certain that the country would not have witnessed the "great barbecue" which Harding and his "Ohio Gang" ushered in. Progressives would not have felt that the reform calendar had been rolled back to the days of Cleveland and McKinley.⁸

Not all of the intellectuals abandoned Progressivism during the twenties. True, Lincoln Steffens had been seduced by a more radical solution to man's ills and for a time was certain that he had seen the future and it worked. Brooks Adams had retired to meditate on his *Degradation of the Democratic Dogma* and to contemplate Oswald Spengler's essay on *The Decline of the West*. John Chamberlain had despaired of the success of democratic reform and looked to the coming revolution. But these are merely examples of the split which existed within the liberal ranks.⁹

Perhaps the most influential progressive intellectuals who were active in the twenties were John Dewey, Charles A. Beard, Thorstein Veblen, Walter Lippmann, and Herbert Croly. All had been prominent in the prewar era, and each had made a contribution to progressive thought. Dewey provided his philosophy of experimentalism or instrumentalism, Beard his political analysis and history, Veblen his pragmatic economics, Lippmann his practical political moderation, and Croly the morale and planning for the future.¹⁰

Dewey's studies, *Human Nature and Conduct* and *The Public and Its Problems*, both of which appeared in the twenties, stressed the necessary reformulation of democracy in terms of the changes taking place in American society. To Dewey the democratic public was still largely unorganized, and the solution was some form of democratic collectivism. His influence was great among the general public as well as in educational circles.

⁸ William T. Hutchinson, *Lowden of Illinois: The Life of Frank O. Lowden* (2 vols., Chicago, 1957), II, 452-83.

⁹ Steffens, *Autobiography*, 790-829; Brooks Adams, *The Degradation of the Democratic Dogma* (New York, 1920), v-xiii; Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West* (New York, 1939); John Chamberlain, *Farewell to Reform: Being a History of the Rise, Life and Decay of the Progressive Mind in America* (New York, 1932).

¹⁰ Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Crisis of the Old Order, 1919-1933* (Cambridge, Mass., 1957), 130-34; Henry Steele Commager, *The American Mind: An Interpretation of American Thought and Character Since the 1880's* (New Haven, 1950), 98-99, 221-25, 305-309.

Beard, in a series of articles as well as in longer works, stressed the need for planning to solve the nation's ills. His *Whither Mankind*, *America Faces the Future*, "A Five Year Plan for America," and "Conservatism Hits Bottom" all foresaw optimistically the future promise in American life built on the American past. Man as a rational animal, Beard argued, would have to impose rationality upon politics and force upon society an even larger area of planned conduct.¹¹

In *The Engineers and the Price System*, as well as in his earlier works, Veblen gave assurance of the technical feasibility of a planned economy. His gibes at the businessman and his preoccupation with profits rather than production and distribution seemed to be an endorsement of the new technology and even earned the endorsement of some industrialists. Veblen's disciples, John R. Commons, Selig Perlman, and Edwin Witte, made economics more meaningful and applicable to the postwar world.¹²

In *Public Opinion* Lippmann argued that the "Great Society" had grown so "furiously and to such colossal dimensions" that the average citizen (including the average lawyer) lacked the competence to direct its affairs. The public had been forced to call in experts who were trained (or had trained themselves) to make parts of this great society intelligible to those who managed it. The social scientist, said Lippmann, had been one of the last of these; but he, too, had to participate in the planning if the society were to function. In *A Preface to Morals* he insisted that men, if they were civilized, must become humanists. By restrained and voluntary reciprocal actions Lippmann would use only democratic processes to achieve the desired social goals. Still later in *The Good Society* Lippmann formulated a balance between liberty and order which would promote the best in American society. His proposals included conservation, reclamation, public hydroelectric power, increased spending on

¹¹ John Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct: An Introduction to Social Psychology* (New York, 1922); John Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems: An Essay in Political Inquiry* (New York, 1927); Charles A. Beard, *Whither Mankind* (New York, 1928); Charles A. Beard (ed.), *America Faces the Future* (New York, 1932); Charles A. Beard, "A Five Year Plan for America," *The Forum*, LXXXVI (July, 1931), 1-11; Charles A. Beard, "Conservatism Hits Bottom," *New Republic*, LXVIII (August 19, 1931), 7-11.

¹² Thorstein Veblen, *The Engineers and the Price System* (New York, 1921); Joseph Dorfman, *Thorstein Veblen and His America* (New York, 1934), 438ff.

health and education, and unemployment insurance. In his balance between man's hopes and fears, caution and confidence, tradition and progress, Lippmann represented much that was best in the American democratic tradition, i.e. rational pragmatism.¹³

Croly edited the *New Republic* throughout the twenties and used the magazine as a rallying point for liberal thought. In its columns he supported such progressive programs as emerged on either the national or state level. After La Follette's defeat in 1924, Croly seemingly lost interest in current politics. The task of the liberal, thought Croly, was to acquire social education and knowledge of human behavior and to put this new learning into use by means of the experimental method.¹⁴

Thus throughout the twenties there was no shortage of intellectual leadership by known and respected progressive scholars and writers. To be sure no liberal synthesis had emerged by the end of the decade that would rally all progressives to its support; but the writings of Dewey, Beard, Veblen, Lippmann, and Croly had much in common. Collectively, they gave small comfort to Herbert Hoover and his "New Era."

Prominent in all accounts of reform during the Progressive Era is some discussion of reform in the cities. Muckraking reporter Lincoln Steffens made his initial reputation describing the graft and political corruption of American cities in a series of articles regarding the "Shame of the Cities." Joseph W. Folk began his career as a reformer on the urban level in St. Louis; Tom Johnson gained the reputation of being the best mayor of the best governed city in the United States in Cleveland; "Golden Rule" Jones won fame for cleaning up Toledo; and Hiram Johnson began his public career prosecuting the graft trials in San Francisco. The experiments with new forms of city government in Galveston and Dayton attracted nationwide attention.¹⁵ Yet the greatest success story of reform on the urban level and the long-

¹³ Walter Lippmann, *Public Opinion* (New York, 1922), 370; Walter Lippmann, *A Preface to Morals* (New York, 1929), 221, 260-83; Walter Lippmann, *An Inquiry into the Principles of the Good Society* (New York, 1937), 212-38.

¹⁴ Schlesinger, *The Crisis of the Old Order*, 133.

¹⁵ Harold Underwood Faulkner, *The Quest for Social Justice* (New York, 1931), 93-104; Cornelius Regier, *The Era of the Muckrakers* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1932), 59-82, 147-57.

continued triumph of good government took place at Cincinnati in the 1920's, a decade when Progressivism was supposedly dead.

Cincinnati at the turn of the century was a notorious graft-ridden, machine-dominated, boss-controlled city. Steffens had written an article on Cincinnati and Boss Cox in which he had asked Cox if he was the boss of the city. "I am," replied Cox. "Of course you have a mayor, and a council, and judges?" queried Steffens. "I have," responded the boss, "I have a telephone, too." This brief, laconic statement, as Steffens said, summed up the truth about Cincinnati, a city dominated by a boss whom the people feared but who did not fear them. If anyone wanted something he went to see George Cox, not the mayor. In fact, Steffens had not even bothered to call on the mayor when he was gathering material for his story; the mayor could not and would not have helped him—he was a mere puppet.¹⁶ Despite a halfhearted effort at reform after the publication of Steffens's article, the city remained under the domination of Boss Cox and the machine. This was still the situation after Cox died, and it continued unchanged through the war and into the decade of the twenties. Then suddenly in 1924 something happened.

Led by Charles P. Taft, brother of the President, and other prominent citizens, the people of Cincinnati set up an organization known as the City Charter Committee. Volunteer workers in great numbers called on voters, distributed pamphlets, and personally explained the proposals—right down to the individual ward, precinct, and block. On election day the voters adopted the new city charter and authorized the establishment of a city-manager type of government. Under the new manager, who was both an army engineer and a graduate lawyer, the city proceeded to clean house. Out went the grafters, corrupt police officials, and known criminals. These individuals fled across the Ohio River to the Kentucky town of Newport and its environs where they established themselves and dominated those communities for a generation.¹⁷

¹⁶ Steffens, *Autobiography*, 482-88.

¹⁷ Charles P. Taft, *City Management: The Cincinnati Experiment* (New York, 1933); for crime and vice in northern Kentucky see James A. Maxwell, "Kentucky's Open City," *Saturday Evening Post*, CCXXXII (March 26, 1960), 22-23, 82-85; *Newsweek*, LVII (May 22, 1961), 25; *ibid.* (June 5, 1961), 33.

Perhaps the key to Cincinnati's success was that the Charter Committee, once the initial battle was won, did not demobilize. Since 1925 the committee has functioned as the Charter party and has worked to put forward the best candidates for the council and to secure their election. The city manager has remained free to manage the city on a scientific basis and takes no orders from political bosses or pressure groups. From being one of the worst governed cities in the nation, Cincinnati has achieved and kept the reputation of being one of the best governed.¹⁸

The popular stereotype has been that the "war broke the Progressive Movement, scattered it, and left it in 1920 with no place to go nor any point on which to re-form."¹⁹ Actually, Progressivism continued to be active somewhere within the United States during the entire period from 1917 to the advent of Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1933. For example, the years 1918-1920 were years of outstanding achievement for progressives in Ohio and Illinois where Governors Cox and Lowden were completing reform programs. Reformers in North Dakota and South Dakota, through the Non-Partisan League, won control of state administrations and established a variety of state economic agencies, including a state bank, state grain elevators, state crop insurance fund, and a state cement factory. In Minnesota the Non-Partisan League laid the foundations for a more permanent farm-labor alliance that survived until the depression.²⁰

In Wisconsin, one of the pioneer progressive leaders among the states, the national trend was briefly inverted. In 1914 when the rest of the country was supporting Wilson and endorsing such measures of the New Freedom program as the Federal Reserve System, the Federal Trade Commission, and the Clayton Act, the voters of Wisconsin had gone

¹⁸ Marguerite J. Fisher and Donald G. Bishop, *Municipal and Other Local Governments* (New York, 1950), 105-106.

¹⁹ Russel B. Nye, *Midwestern Progressive Politics: A Historical Study of Its Origins and Developments, 1870-1958* (East Lansing, Mich., 1959), 310; William E. Leuchtenburg, *The Perils of Prosperity, 1914-32* (Chicago, 1958).

²⁰ Link, "What Happened to the Progressive Movement in the 1920's?," 833-37; Hutchinson, *Lowden of Illinois*, II, *passim*; Robert L. Morlan, *Political Prairie Fire: The Non Partisan League, 1915-1922* (Minneapolis, 1955), *passim*; Nye, *Midwestern Progressive Politics*, 313-19; Theodore Saloutos and John D. Hicks, *Agricultural Discontent in the Middle West, 1900-1939* (Madison, 1951), 100-48.

conservative. In that year they elected as governor a millionaire refrigerator car magnate, Emanuel Philipp, who ran on a platform denouncing progressive reforms and promising to reduce the service and regulatory commissions which the La Follette organization had set up. Philipp held office for three terms until 1920, and though he was far from an unenlightened governor, by no means could one describe him as a near-progressive. He had opposed the primary election system, the state income tax, and the increased welfare program of the state. His most liberal actions involved his staunch defense of civil liberties against the "110% American" vigilante groups and his denunciation of mob violence under the name of patriotism.²¹

Then in 1920, when the country was endorsing Harding and the return to normalcy, the Wisconsin voters elected a La Follette lieutenant, John J. Blaine. As governor he immediately initiated a new period of progressive reform in Wisconsin. Under Blaine, the state increased the state income tax on corporate and large personal incomes, doubled the inheritance tax, created a department of markets, enacted a home rule for cities amendment, and won important gains for industrial workers. In 1926 Blaine went to the United States Senate where he continued his support of organized labor and farm legislation. He regularly sought the repeal of the Eighteenth Amendment; in fact it was he who introduced the Senate resolution which set in motion the process of repeal. Blaine was a vigorous progressive in the La Follette tradition and, as could be predicted, gave no support to Harding, Coolidge, or Hoover.²²

In New York voters demonstrated that the reform spirit was far from dead during the twenties. Four times between 1918 and 1928 the people of the Empire State elected Alfred E. Smith governor. Smith's background was in direct contrast to that of other progressive governors of New York such as Theodore Roosevelt, Charles Evans Hughes, or his successor, Franklin D. Roosevelt. Born on the lower east side of

²¹ Maxwell, *Emanuel L. Philipp*, 152-80.

²² *Ibid.*, 207-20; Herbert F. Margulies, "The Election of 1920 in Wisconsin: The Return to 'Normalcy' Reappraised," *Wisconsin Magazine of History* (Autumn, 1957), 15-22; Edward N. Doan, *The La Follettes and the Wisconsin Idea* (New York, 1947), 76, 122ff; William F. Raney, *Wisconsin, A Story of Progress* (New York, 1940), 356-59.

Manhattan and growing up in near poverty with limited educational opportunity, Smith was a rare combination of Tammany politician and thoroughgoing liberal. Though he understood and spoke the language of the machine, Smith was equally knowledgeable about the public interest; and he was devoted to it. He used trained experts with skill and confidence but also had an uncanny faculty for the essence of good government. He knew that reform would not last unless it was based on popular understanding. He frequently said that "honest politics were the best politics"—not just money honesty, but also honesty in discussing issues. His programs succeeded, in part, because he saw politics as an "educational process."²³

Smith's record as governor was thoroughly liberal. In his first term during the Red Scare of 1919-1920, he opposed the repressive Lusk bills, denounced the Palmer raids, and spoke against the expulsion of Socialists from the New York State Assembly. In proposing the reorganization of the executive department, Smith demonstrated his broad bipartisan interest in good government by nominating and securing the appointment of Charles Evans Hughes as chairman of the commission. Due largely to Smith's efforts the report was completed, adopted, and in 1927 went into effect. In other reforms he systematically eliminated grade crossings in the state, established a state health laboratory, expanded the state park system, and pushed public ownership and operation of the state's waterpower facilities. He sponsored labor legislation to protect women and children, liberalized the workman's compensation law, and secured the adoption for New York of the forty-eight hour week. He also reorganized the tax program, expanded social services, and enlarged public works. Smith was perhaps the outstanding progressive governor of the decade.²⁴

Nor were Wisconsin and New York merely the isolated afterglow of the fires of reform in what La Follette called the "laboratories of democracy." In Pennsylvania, Bull Moose Progressive Gifford Pinchot, onetime chief forester of the United States and promoter of conservation, became governor

²³ Schlesinger, *The Crisis of the Old Order*, 97-98.

²⁴ *Ibid.*; David M. Ellis et al., *A Short History of New York State* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1957), 393-406; Oscar Handlin, *Al Smith and His America* (Boston, 1958), 90-111.

in 1923. His record of reform achievements included the reorganization of the executive branch, improvement of the state civil service system, adoption of sound budget procedures, creation of a state bureau for women and children, legislation facilitating collective bargaining for the state's miners, and establishment of a giant power survey which later became the basis for the federal rural electrification projects.²⁵

In the South such reform-minded governors as Cameron Morrison of North Carolina, Bibb Graves of Alabama, and Austin Peay of Tennessee achieved notable successes in expanding public services, modernizing the machinery of government, and developing state highway programs. Many southern states during this period made progress in establishing welfare programs, instituting tax reforms, and continuing improvement in public education. In Louisiana where an oppressive oligarchy had stifled change too long, reform wore the dictatorial face of the "Kingfish" Huey Long. The social reforms which Long forced through the legislature were certainly overdue, and the impact of his leadership was unusually great. "Perhaps the lesson of Long," writes one scholar of Louisiana history, T. Harry Williams, "is that if in a democracy needed changes are denied too long by an interested minority, when they come, the changes will come with a measure of repression and revenge." Thus it would be inaccurate to picture the South in the twenties as entirely engrossed in the Ku Klux Klan, prohibition, and Bible Belt fundamentalism, important as these influences were. There were other and fresher breezes stirring also.²⁶

One final example of continued Progressivism on the state level is California. The Bear State had been in the forefront of the reform movement during the governorship of Hiram Johnson, from 1911 to 1917, and had been a leader in the development of direct legislation. After a period of reaction, Clement C. Young, running on a reform platform, captured the governorship in 1926 and reversed the conservative trend. He pushed through a variety of progressive

²⁵ Martin L. Fausold, *Gifford Pinchot, Bull Moose Progressive* (Syracuse, N.Y., 1961), 249ff.

²⁶ Dewey W. Grantham, Jr., *The Democratic South* (Athens, Ga., 1963), 62-64; T. Harry Williams, "The Gentleman from Louisiana: Demagogue or Democrat," *The Journal of Southern History*, XXVI (February, 1960), 17.

measures and left a record of having been one of the most liberal and able administrators in the history of the state.²⁷

Nationally, a considerable group of reformers—old Progressives, liberal intellectuals, single taxers, and others—had met in St. Louis during the winter of 1920 seeking to develop some permanent organization to include the several progressive groups. They formed the “Committee of Forty-Eight” which investigated the possibilities of a new, radical, left wing, third party movement. The group broke up, however, when La Follette refused to run on their platform. Some retired to await the further turn of the political wheel, and the residue endorsed the farmer-laborer candidate for president and in effect disappeared.²⁸

Throughout the twenties there was always a nucleus of progressives in Congress. One popular magazine found in the House fifteen from Wisconsin, five from Minnesota, one each from Kansas, North Dakota, and New York. In the Senate there was a solid corps of progressives: La Follette, Norris, William E. Borah, Smith Brookhart, Edwin F. Ladd, Lynn Frazier, Burton K. Wheeler, Henrik Shipstead, and Charles McNary. After the elections of 1922 this group held the balance of power. A conference of progressive-minded leaders in Washington in December, 1921, led to the formation of the Conference for Progressive Political Action (CPPA) early the next year. The CPPA, described as having something of the flavor of the old National Progressive Republican League, took an active part in the off year congressional elections of 1922; and this led directly into the third party campaign of 1924.²⁹

Most of the old progressives (except for Borah), liberals, social workers, farm group leaders, and intellectuals supported La Follette in his presidential bid on the independent Progressive party ticket. Despite the fact that La Follette polled almost five million votes, carried his home state of Wisconsin, and ran second in eleven other states (all in the West or Midwest), it is hard to believe that any experienced

²⁷ Mowry, *The California Progressives*, 291.

²⁸ Nye, *Midwestern Progressive Politics*, 324-25; La Follette, *Robert M. La Follette*, II, 998-1011.

²⁹ La Follette, *Robert M. La Follette*, II, 1055-73, 1098; Schlesinger, *The Crisis of the Old Order*, 101; Nye, *Midwestern Progressive Politics*, 325-27.

observer seriously expected a Progressive victory or that La Follette could throw the election into the House of Representatives. A temporary third party movement, especially one organized in July of the election year, with no grass-roots candidates for state and local offices, could not expect to unseat one of the major parties. Rather, and without denying La Follette's sincerity and dedication, the Progressive campaign of 1924 was more a race for the record: to make an effective protest against the conservatism and lack of vision of both major parties, and to keep the various reform elements together against the day that the political tide would turn liberal again. La Follette, at sixty-nine, could hardly have been expected to take over and to run effectively the federal machinery of government even had he been elected. The aftermath of the election, when the Republican leadership stripped La Follette, Ladd, Frazier, and Brookhart of their committee assignments and in effect read them out of the party, did much to destroy the future of the GOP. It forced most progressive Republicans to turn to the Democrats for a liberal party, and in turn their migration helped make the Democratic party the vehicle of reform in the United States.³⁰

During these years of minority influence in Congress, the progressives developed a legislative program that later would bear fruit. Led by the farm bloc representatives with assistance from such outside old progressives as George N. Peek and Hugh Johnson, they worked out a comprehensive farm relief plan and incorporated it into the McNary-Haugen Bill. The measure twice passed Congress; and though vetoed by Coolidge, the plan was accepted by most reform-minded persons as part of a basic and necessary federal program for farm relief.³¹

A second major development in the progressive legislative program was in the field of public power. At the beginning of the decade the progressives in Congress were hard put to sustain George Norris in his fight against federal disposal of the Tennessee Valley properties at Muscle Shoals. Before the end of the twenties they had developed a campaign which would commit the federal government to large-scale hydroelectric projects on the Tennessee, the Columbia, the Colorado, and the St. Lawrence rivers. By 1928 they had found enough allies in Congress and enough support from

³⁰ Kenneth MacKay, *The Progressive Movement of 1924* (New York, 1947); La Follette, *Robert M. La Follette*, II, 1127ff.

³¹ Gilbert C. Fite, *George N. Peek and the Fight for Farm Parity* (Norman, Okla., 1954), 169-203.

the public to pass a bill for limited federal development of the Tennessee Valley. Coolidge killed this by a pocket veto, and three years later Hoover vetoed a second attempt. But these were only temporary setbacks; the future was definitely on their side.³²

Other progressive proposals of the twenties were also to bear fruit at a later date. Coupled with the Muscle Shoals question was a drive to investigate and curb the great utility trusts such as the Insull empire. La Follette and Norris pushed a variety of other reform legislation which, though not passed in the twenties, became part of the liberal program. These included a demand for a "lame duck" amendment as early as 1922, a proposal to strengthen the Federal Reserve System and guarantee bank deposits, and a continuing drive to stop the excessive use by the federal courts of the injunction in labor disputes. This last item was achieved in the final year of Hoover's term with the passage of the Norris-La Guardia Anti-Injunction Act.³³

Once the issues of the Versailles Treaty and the League of Nations were finally buried, the progressives were even able to agree on many questions of foreign policy. Prominent among these was the diplomatic recognition of Soviet Russia. Indeed, during the twenties the progressives led the fight to create a climate of opinion which would favor the restoration of normal relations with the Soviets. Perhaps foremost in this drive was William E. Borah, the Idaho progressive, who could be counted on to be irregular and independent except on election day. Borah argued that recognition of the Communists would in no sense imply approval of their government. If that were true the United States would have had to sever relations with several nations that were currently recognized. It would simply be a recognition that they had a government.³⁴

Senator Smith Brookhart of Iowa and La Follette made short trips to Europe and the Soviet Union in 1923. On their return they joined Borah in demanding a reversal of the policy of nonrecognition. All three argued that continuation of Russia's status as an outlaw was dangerous to the peace of

³² George W. Norris, *Fighting Liberal: The Autobiography of George W. Norris* (New York, 1945), 250-66.

³³ *Ibid.*, 323-34; Doan, *The La Follettes and the Wisconsin Idea*, 116; Charles Garrett, *The La Guardia Years: Machine and Reform Politics in New York City* (New Brunswick, N.J., 1961), 120.

³⁴ *New York Times*, March 19, July 26, 1923; Claudius O. Johnson, *Borah of Idaho* (New York, 1936), 355; *Congressional Record*, 67 Cong., 3 Sess., 4184ff.

the world. The western nations would find it easier to deal with the Soviets as a member of the family of nations than as an international outcast. Brookhart stressed the possible commercial advantages that might accrue from restoration of normal relations as the Russians were in need of the very types of goods which America had to export. La Follette argued that the Russian people could establish any type of government that they liked, and the Communist state was at least as respectable as Italy under Mussolini or some of the Latin American dictatorships. On at least two occasions Borah introduced resolutions into the Senate calling for the immediate recognition of the Soviet Union. Though these proposals never came to a vote, Borah used the hearings as an opportunity to explain the arguments for recognition to the general public. In this he received wide publicity in the nation's press.³⁵

In his 1924 campaign for the presidency La Follette devoted one speech to foreign policy proposals in which he called for recognition of the Soviet Union. The number of advocates of resumption of normal diplomatic relations with Russia steadily grew. Bronson Cutting, William King, Wheeler, and Norris all came out in favor of recognition. The fact that a private Russian trading company, Amtorg, was steadily increasing trade with the United States on an informal basis and that such American firms as General Electric, Ford, and Du Pont were doing business in this fashion lent an economic argument to the drive for recognition. With the coming of the depression many progressives, including Borah, came to look upon Russian recognition as a means to stimulate trade and to help bring a return of prosperity to the United States. This trade, argued Borah, would be worth billions.³⁶

By the time of the Progressive Conference in Washington in March of 1931, liberals throughout the nation were overwhelmingly in favor of recognition. The *New York Times* observed that sentiment for recognition was now general and quoted Charles A. Beard with obvious approval to the effect that Russia should be recognized now. Well before the election

³⁵ *Congressional Record*, 68 Cong., 1 Sess., 228; *La Follette's Magazine*, XVI (January, 1924), 1, 5.

³⁶ *New York Times*, October 11, 1924; *The Literary Digest*, XCIX (November 10, 1928), 12, *ibid.*, CII (August 17, 1929), 8; *The Nation*, CXXXII (February 18, 1931), 168.

of 1932 and the advent of FDR and the New Deal, cultural recognition had been accomplished (nine thousand Americans visited the USSR in 1931); and such varied public figures as Hiram Johnson, Al Smith, Robert La Follette, Jr., Alben Barkley, William Allen White, and H. V. Kaltenborn had all spoken in favor of renewed diplomatic and commercial relations with the Soviet Union. It remained only for a change of administration for recognition to be accomplished.³⁷

There remains the task of describing the bridge whereby the progressives of the twenties, together with their intellectual and political baggage, made their way across to the New Deal in 1932 and 1933. The way is rather clearly marked. George Norris had, as he called it, "crossed the Rubicon" in 1928, abandoned the Republican party, and supported Al Smith. In 1932 he was a close and respected advisor of FDR, especially on matters of public power. Burton K. Wheeler, La Follette's running mate in 1924, came out for Roosevelt in 1930, saying that the New York governor more nearly typified the "progressive thought of the nation" than anyone else in public life. Harold Ickes, the old Bull Moose Progressive of 1912, had deserted the Republicans in 1928. In 1932 he actively campaigned for FDR and organized the Western Independent Republicans for Roosevelt.³⁸

Most of the survivors of the La Follette Progressive campaign of 1924—La Follette, Jr., Wheeler, Cutting, and others—were ready to join in the drive to restore a liberal government under Roosevelt. Norris had drawn cheers and applause when he told the audience at the Progressive Conference in 1931 that the country would not get progressive legislation until it got a progressive president, "another Roosevelt." They agreed with Norris that FDR was the "only hope of the country."³⁹

It is surprising how many of the bright young men and women who had battled with TR at the Bull Moose Convention in 1912, marched with Woodrow Wilson under the

³⁷ New York *Times*, February 1, March 12, 1931, March 22, 1932; George Soule, "An American Policy Toward Russia," *The New Republic*, LXVII (June 3, 1931), 61-65; Joseph Baines, "Cultural Recognition of Russia," *The Nation*, XXXIV (May 18, 1932), 565.

³⁸ Norris, *Fighting Liberal*, 266, 286; Alfred Lief, *Democracy's Norris: The Biography of a Lonely Crusade* (New York, 1939), 375-79; Harold L. Ickes, *The Secret Diary of Harold L. Ickes* (3 vols., New York, 1954), I, vii-ix.

³⁹ Schlesinger, *The Crisis of the Old Order*, 278, 417; Frank Freidel, *Franklin D. Roosevelt: The Triumph* (New York, 1956), 279.

New Freedom banner the same year, or absorbed the liberal philosophy of social workers Jane Addams, Lillian Wald, and Florence Kelley, remained to support Franklin Roosevelt in 1932 and to help organize the New Deal.

Among the Bull Moose Progressives who answered the call to support another Roosevelt a generation later, in addition to Ickes and Norris, were such younger men as Gifford Pinchot, Donald Richberg, Henry A. Wallace, Francis Biddle, Felix Frankfurter, and Dean Acheson. Among the young followers of Wilson (in addition to Roosevelt himself) who played important roles in the New Deal were Cordell Hull, John N. Garner, Sam Rayburn, and Homer Cummings. Hull House, Henry Street, and other settlement houses had trained Henry Morgenthau, Jr., Herbert Lehman, Adolph A. Berle, Jr., Frances Perkins, Sidney Hillman, Joseph B. Eastman, and a young man fresh from Grinnell College in Iowa, Harry Hopkins. Of these Frances Perkins, Morgenthau, and Hopkins had all served FDR in Albany. Somewhere in this list belongs Fiorello La Guardia, a progressive Republican who had not supported the Republican party since 1920 (if then). All of these, and more, campaigned for FDR in 1932 and joyfully accepted assignments as offered in the New Deal program that followed. Indeed, they had no other place to go. Progressivism became respectable again in high places, liberalism was in the saddle, and the pattern of reform was resumed.⁴⁰

From the vantage point of more than thirty years, the dozen or so years of progressive eclipse during the days of Normalcy and the New Era do not seem so long. It is evident that during these years Progressivism was not dead but simply temporarily interrupted, divided, and lacking in effective leadership. In many areas reform continued to display surprising vigor. Progressives, found in intellectual circles, in city reform crusades, in state administrations, and in an outspoken minority in Congress, provided a bridge for the ideas and ideals of the Progressive Era to cross over the twenties to the New Deal. Then with the rise of new and dynamic progressive leadership, the reformers flocked to Franklin D. Roosevelt's banner to resume the American pragmatic pattern of protest and reform. More than thirty years later it is still going on.

⁴⁰ Garrett, *The La Guardia Years*, 119-20; Schlesinger, *The Crisis of the Old Order*, 25-26, 421-22; Freidel, *Franklin D. Roosevelt: The Triumph*, 241-60, 360-71.