Chapter 2

The Rise and Fall of the Citizen

FOR MORE THAN two centuries, the survival of Western governments depended not just on the consent of the governed but on their active and willing cooperation. By contributing to the administrative, coercive, and extractive capabilities of their countries, the governed elevated themselves from mere subjecthood to the dignity of citizenship. They made their entrance disruptively in the eighteenth century with the revolutionary bang of the shot heard round the world. In time, however, they brought a welcome stability to national politics. They represented the foundation of public order and the energy source for functioning government.

In return for their services, citizens received a variety of benefits, perhaps most notably the right to vote. The history of suffrage is often written to suggest that the opportunity to participate in national politics was wrung from unwilling rulers after bitter popular struggles. Yet, as E. E. Schattschneider observed, the difficulty with which voting rights were secured in the United States and elsewhere has often been overstated.¹ Political elites learned that accepting the extension of suffrage was worthwhile even though it seemed to pose a risk to their own power. By integrating citizens into the political order, elites enhanced the state’s ability to wage war, raise revenues, and administer the government. In the eighteenth century, governments usually resisted demands for suf-
frage expansion. By the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, however, Western regimes had come to see popular voting rights in a more favorable light.

The tacit exchange of service for benefits drew citizens further and more fully into political life. Citizen administrators supplied much of the energy for vigorous political party organizations. Expansion of the government’s revenue base to include tens of millions of ordinary citizens also expanded the power of the representative institutions. These institutions encouraged popular cooperation with tax collectors and moderated conflicts about the distribution of tax burdens. Reliance upon citizen soldiers expanded the boundaries of participation as those asked to fight demanded the right to vote.

Today, at the start of a new millennium, however, Western governments’ reliance on the support and cooperation of citizens has diminished, and the scope of popular participation has narrowed. Today’s public authorities manage to raise armies, collect taxes, and implement policies without widespread citizen involvement. These changes have enabled political elites to reduce their dependence upon popular political participation and to secure and exercise power by means other than mass politics. The era of the modern citizen, which began with a bang, is quietly slipping away.

In some respects, the symptoms of this change are most marked in America. The democratic exceptionalism of the Tocquevillian republic stands in stark contrast to the democratic demobilization of contemporary politics. The presidential election of 2000 is emblematic of the new order. In the most competitive and closely fought contest in generations, only a bare 50 percent of the electorate bothered to go to the polls, and the ordeal ended in a judicial determination that the counting of votes was not decisive in any case. Like the litigious contestants of 2000, contemporary political elites have substantially marginalized the American mass electorate and have come to rely more and more upon courts and bureaucracies to get what they want.

The essential and original claim of American exceptionalism was not just that we were different from other nations but that we had a different way of being a nation. America was a community of political belief, not of blood and soil. Political scientist Hans Morgenthau—no sentimentalist—detected something almost spiritual at the core of the country. Unlike other nations, America did not, he argued, gradually arrive at a conception of its national mission by reflecting retrospectively on the course of its history. “The rule that action precedes reflection in the discovery of the national purpose suffers but one complete exception. The United
States,” Morgenthau wrote, “is the only nation that has reversed the sequence. The awareness of its purpose was not an afterthought. The United States was founded with a particular purpose in mind.”

John Winthrop provided a classic illustration of the anticipatory purposefulness that Morgenthau saw in American politics. In the middle of the Atlantic, on the deck of the Arbella, Winthrop—soon to be the first governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony—preached a sermon to his fellow travelers, who would soon become the first citizens of that colony. His subject was the purpose of their errand in the wilderness, an errand not yet begun. The purpose that Winthrop had in mind was, of course, religious as well as political, but it was also a universal purpose that spoke to all humankind and not to a narrow sect. In the most famous passage of his sermon he urged his shipmates to “consider that we shall be as a city on a hill, the eyes of all people are upon us.” But in a less prominent place, before he reached the summit of his homily, Winthrop reflected on the nature of the religious bonds that would solidify the Puritan political community: “though we be absent from each other many miles . . . yet we ought to account ourselves knit together by this bond of love.”

From the outset, the American polity was no mere territorial community; it was not defined by spatial propinquity. It was a compact among fellow believers. And although the nation remained Anglo-American for centuries, it would eventually surrender much of its ethnic distinctiveness as well. America claimed to be a nation defined by shared and universally valid purpose or principle. Long after that purpose had ceased to be a Puritan one, it still retained something of its original religious resonance. To English journalist G. K. Chesterton, America was the nation with the soul of a church. In Gunnar Myrdal’s formulation, Americans became the people of the Creed: they shared a set of beliefs that was supposed to set the nation’s existence on a different plane than that of other nations, and although writers like Samuel Huntington and Louis Hartz have found much that was troublesome in the Creed, hardly anyone denied its power.

But a political community organized around ideas might redefine or simply dissolve itself much more easily than one rooted in blood and soil. Though all nations may be imagined communities, some are more imaginary than others. In the Civil War, America showed that it could imagine itself out of existence, and though we face no such dramatic rupture today, the bonds of American citizenship are sufficiently exiguous that they can be redefined in ways that drastically change the role and political attachments of the American people.

The exceptionalist vision of Americans as a people united only by democratic purpose may have been a patriotic conceit, but in the
nineteenth-century Republic there was very little else to hold the citizens together as a nation. Even coercive efforts to preserve the country, like the Civil War, could scarcely have succeeded without an army of volunteers devoted to the cause of the Union. In an earlier departure from the exceptionalist vision, President Jefferson acquired the territory of Louisiana without first securing the consent of its inhabitants. They were citizens by purchase, not by principled belief. But the very fact that the government’s hold over its new territorial acquisition was so tenuous made national authorities especially deferential to the inhabitants and heavily reliant on their willingness not only to transfer their loyalties from Paris or Madrid to Washington but to take on the work of governing. To facilitate such cooperation, the government agreed that courts in the most heavily populated section of the Louisiana Purchase would follow the continental civil code rather than the English common law.5 They still do.

Nineteenth-century American citizens helped to perform the work of government and in return gained a voice in government. Of course, the United States was not the only nation that employed citizens to perform the tasks of government. What distinguished the United States from European regimes of the nineteenth century was the exceptional extent of its reliance on citizen government. The framers of the American Constitution were hardly radical democrats, but they felt compelled to provide for popular political participation in order to ensure that the new regime would have citizens’ backing. They had no choice. More than forty years after they completed their deliberations, Alexis de Tocqueville reported that he had found nothing in America that a European would regard as government.6 There was no professional civil service surviving from an earlier era of royal administration. There was scarcely any standing army. The country’s territory extended to remote regions in which the only government was what the citizens provided themselves. It was no wonder that American government was exceptional for its attentiveness to citizen sensibilities and for its professed dedication to the creed of popular sovereignty. The United States was more democratic than other states of the time partly because it was exceptionally dependent on the good will, cooperation, and work of its people.

The Rise and Fall of the Citizen Administrator

Early-nineteenth-century America was certainly no bureaucratic state. Without a corps of professional civil servants to bring the government to bear on its people, early American administration had to rely heavily upon the people themselves. America’s nineteenth-century administra-
tors might have been lacking in expertise, but they possessed other essentials of public administration, namely, loyalty and public standing. Indeed, even European states with technically proficient bureaucrats had long recognized that expertise by itself was insufficient. Two more fundamental attributes were also vital. First, administrators had to be loyal to the government they were supposed to serve, and, second, they had to be capable of securing public compliance with government policy.

In early-modern Europe, meeting these two conditions was often far more difficult than securing competent administrators. In England and France, for example, the clergy provided a ready source of trained and reasonably competent administrators. Wolsey in sixteenth-century England and Mazarin and Richelieu in seventeenth-century France were prominent figures in this administrative tradition. These cardinals, in turn, recruited bishops and priests to flesh out the administrative structures of emergent nation-states. As the case of Thomas Becket suggests, however, kings could not always rely upon the loyalty of their clerical servants, particularly when princes and popes vied for secular power.

In early modern Spain, kings sought to avoid subordination to the church by drawing upon the exceptionally talented Jewish community as a source of managerial and financial acumen. As a result, particularly in Castile, many of the highest administrative positions were frequently held by conversos, Jews who had nominally accepted the Catholic faith in order to be legally eligible for government service. The conversos were vigorously loyal to the Crown. The king was their only protector in a hostile society that still regarded them as Jews. But it was precisely this anti-Semitic hostility that undermined public compliance with the dictates of a government managed by conversos. Dissident forces, charging that the regime had been subverted by Jews, insisted that its legitimacy was forfeit.

The American solution to the twin problems of administrative loyalty and popular compliance was patronage. It was not an American invention. England had known patronage at least since the Tudors, who had met the problem of compliance by recruiting members of the local gentry as administrators, in the hope that the respect these worthies commanded in their communities might rub off on the government they served. The existing social hierarchy provided an armature to support administrative authority. And, since the appointees could expect to retain their posts only so long as their sponsors were in power, they had a tangible stake in the political survival of their patrons and a strong incentive to political loyalty. Patronage and public administration have been partners since the beginnings of modern state bureaucracies, and patronage was not necessarily inconsistent with effective government. Political
leaders had good reason to choose the most competent of their retainers. Still, in eighteenth-century England, “no aspiring office holder could obtain a place without proper political connections or an obliging relative in high places.”

In the United States, as political scientist Martin Shefter points out, political patronage was far more extensive than in most European states because mass-based political parties emerged in this country long before there was a professional civil service. Because America possessed strong parties and no civil service tradition, government jobs were freely available for distribution as patronage. The parties did not hesitate to exploit this resource. Patronage became an American system of government—the spoils system. The Jacksonians are charged with introducing the system to reward their political friends and build a party machine at the expense of the public treasury. The charge is not unfounded. But patronage served other purposes too, as it had for the Tudors. After the Jacksonians’ 1828 victory, they faced not only their supporters’ demand for government jobs but also an executive branch staffed by holdovers from the Adams administration, staffers who might sabotage their efforts to set a new course for the federal government. The remedy was a proscription of public employees associated with the prior government, and their replacement by loyal Jackson partisans.

Jackson brushed aside concerns about the competence of the new partisan administrators, declaring that public administration required no special capabilities: “The duties of all public officers are, or at least admit of being made, so plain and simple that men of intelligence may readily qualify themselves for their performance; and I cannot but believe that more is lost by the long continuance of men in office than is generally to be gained by their experience.”

Under Andrew Jackson, between 10 and 20 percent of the government’s administrative personnel were removed to make room for supporters of the new regime. Although the numbers were not as large as charged by Old Hickory’s antagonists, the Jacksonians established the principle that the loyalty of public servants was to be ensured through the appointment of a new administration’s partisan supporters. In 1840, when the Whig candidate, William Henry Harrison, captured the White House for the first time, the new cabinet met and resolved to replace Democratic appointees with loyal Whig supporters. Within a year, nearly twenty-three hundred Democrats had been removed to make way for the new president’s adherents. When the Democrats returned to office in 1844, they replaced thousands of Whig appointees with their own men.

Patronage helped to guarantee not only the loyalty of government functionaries but also their ability to secure citizen compliance with
government policy. In the United States, the problem of compliance was considerably more acute than it had been in England. The American government was weak, and its power did not extend very far into the country, particularly after the Louisiana Purchase opened vast new lands to settlement. By the 1820s, frontier squatters routinely ignored federal land law and imposed their own property settlements through armed violence and intimidation. Settlers who held their land under grants from the French or Spanish government might be less than fully loyal to Washington. In the South, doctrines of states rights and, eventually, of nullification challenged the authority of a federal government lacking the military force to impose its will on a recalcitrant population. Civil servants had to do more than administer. They had to win the loyalty of a people and shore up the legitimacy of the government that they served.

Unlike the Tudors, America’s democratic rulers could not appoint members of a landed gentry to administrative posts in order to capitalize on the respect that they commanded among their less prestigious neighbors. Outside the South, there was no landed gentry, and hierarchies of status had always been much weaker in America than in Europe. By the 1820s, economic and political change had further eroded the institutions that supported distinctions of rank and privilege. But political parties were growing stronger, and the local leaders who ran them were prime candidates for federal employment. A party politician who enjoyed popularity among his neighbors (rather than aristocratic rank) and commanded their votes (if not their deference) might also command their compliance with federal law and “win the good will and affections of the people for the government.”

For the remainder of the nineteenth century and into the early years of the twentieth, patronage employees provided successive governments with a generally loyal body of administrators whose own retention in office was linked to the success of the politicians they served. By courting the voters, patronage employees also helped to build support for the regime they served. They provided citizens with a host of particularized benefits ranging from social services to legal assistance and employment. At times, these citizen administrators were able to secure popular compliance when coercion would probably have failed. During the Civil War, the efforts of Republican patronage workers helped to win acceptance of military conscription, assisted in the sale of government securities, and bolstered tax collection. The North’s superior party and patronage organization played a largely unheralded role in the Union victory.

Citizen administrators not only helped to preserve the national government but also adapted its practices to local circumstances, local needs,
and local political considerations. Harold Gosnell’s classic study of machine politics in Chicago during the 1920s and 1930s shows how administrators reshaped government programs to fit the needs of individual citizens. Patronage workers helped constituents qualify for veterans’ pensions, obtain citizenship for relatives, and secure government housing assistance through the Home Owners’ Loan Corporation. They helped the sick to get public medical services, helped immigrant entrepreneurs secure permits needed for small businesses, showed them how to meet (or evade) complicated building and zoning codes, and helped their delinquent children to navigate the criminal justice system.\(^\text{13}\)

From the perspective of the cosmopolitan upper classes of the late nineteenth century, this particularistic style of administration represented corruption and political favoritism, and perhaps they were correct. But at least some later observers offered a more benign analysis of patronage politics and the party machines that it supported. “In our prevaingly impersonal society,” wrote sociologist Robert Merton, “the machine, through its local agents, fulfills the important social function of humanizing and personalizing all manner of assistance to those in need,” a welcome alternative to “the cold bureaucratic dispensation of limited aid” by official welfare agencies.\(^\text{14}\) Today’s customer-friendly bureaucrats may have been trained to dispense services and assistance with more personal warmth than their predecessors. Their jobs, however, do not depend on loyalty to the party in power, and they have no role in the political mobilization of their clients. Public administration may continue to be an instrument of democracy, but it has largely abandoned its role as a functioning part of the democratic order itself.

The citizen administrator was the backbone of the political party organizations that were instrumental in expanding popular participation during the nineteenth century. Unlike their contemporary counterparts, they had a stake in expanding popular political participation because it was the basis upon which their own power and position rested. The government’s reliance upon citizen administrators linked the state to mass participation. Using hundreds of thousands of patronage employees as their campaign workers, American political parties during the nineteenth century were capable of prodigious feats of electoral mobilization. In some regions, party machines maintained levels of voter turnout approaching 90 percent. During the critical 1896 presidential election, Republican party workers brought more than 25 percent of the Republican voters from every state in the union to walk past candidate William McKinley’s home in rural Ohio as part of McKinley’s “front porch” campaign.\(^\text{15}\) Citizen administrators worked directly to enlarge and elaborate the universe of popular politics.
Progressives fought to replace these short-term and decidedly amateur administrators with professional bureaucrats whose chief loyalty would be to the state rather than to parties and fellow partisans. Accordingly, Progressives supported extension of the merit system in which an autonomous civil service commission selected government workers on the basis of competitive examinations rather than political loyalty and service.

Progressives insisted on the separation of administration from politics. In his professorial phase, Woodrow Wilson himself pronounced the orthodoxy. Administration was a science or technology that aimed to achieve public objectives with greatest efficiency. But the administrators had no business helping to define those objectives. That was the job of politics. Administrators were politically neutral experts who served everyone and no one. They were pledged to the public interest rather than to the partisan purposes of the current administration. The divorce of administration from politics also detached public bureaucracy from the popular base on which it had formerly rested. This separation, however, also implied the creation of a professionally staffed bureaucracy that would permit governments to function without having to mobilize popular support or win citizen compliance.

To ensure that government employees would be insulated as much as possible from popular political currents, academics and intellectuals linked to the Progressive movement invented “personnel administration.” Its original principles called for military-like position-classification schemes; efficiency reports and evaluations; the idea of public service as a lifetime career; the circulation of bureaucrats among regions or localities; regulations governing salary, benefits, and promotions; and retirement and pension plans. The techniques of personnel administration were designed to permit the work of government employees to be directed from the top down and to prevent those employees from being influenced by shifts in popular sentiment or by local attachments. Government would be able to rely upon this permanent civil service to escape its historic dependence upon short-term citizen administrators.

Many of the basic principles of personnel administration were adopted by the federal government in response to the report of the Keep Commission, appointed by President Theodore Roosevelt in 1905 to recommend improvements in federal administrative practices. Roosevelt’s successor, William Howard Taft, created the Commission on Economy and Efficiency, which supplemented the Keep Commission’s work by elaborating principles of position classification and employee efficiency evaluation. As they hoped, the Progressives had begun the separation of government from popular political mobilization. By the mid–twentieth
century, patronage survived only in a few redoubts like Cook County, Illinois. The machinery of government was in the hands of professionals rather than citizen administrators. Later, even civil servants began to give way to the employees of private firms that contracted to perform the government’s work—one further step removed from the public will that endowed the state with its authority.

Taxation: From Voluntary Compliance to Automaticity

Revenue was as necessary to government as reliable administrators. In early-modern Europe, erratic tax systems made for fiscal instability and impeded the development of strong nation-states. Rulers generally depended upon income from their own lands, contributions from a usually reluctant nobility, and loans from financiers. Not only were these revenue sources unreliable, but they made rulers heavily dependent upon the noble estates and the wealthy financiers who controlled their fiscal destinies. Beginning in the sixteenth century, European monarchs introduced new revenue-raising devices designed to produce money more reliably, and without the political inconvenience of dependence on powerful barons or bankers. In France, for example, successive regimes sought to tax crops, acreage, and commerce, and at times they resorted to the sale of government offices and the confiscation of church properties. After taking control of Brandenburg-Prussia in the fifteenth century, the Hohenzollerns replaced the preexisting feudal revenue system with taxes on property and beer production. The effectiveness of the new measures was limited. In England, successive Tudor kings sought to introduce a variety of direct taxes but were unable to seize the purse strings from Parliament. Throughout Europe, a patchwork of customs duties and excise taxes also were introduced. These were often so inefficient that collection costs exceeded the revenues that accrued to the government.

Beginning in the eighteenth century, European governments broadened the revenue base to the public at large. In addition to imposing income and poll taxes, states started to sell securities in denominations small enough that ordinary citizens, not just bankers and financiers, might purchase them. These new mechanisms produced a steady and substantial flow of royal revenue and diminished royal dependence on the crown’s most powerful subjects. But in broadening the base for revenue collection, the state also broadened the population whose loyalty and support it had to cultivate. With expanded taxation came demands for expanded representation and citizen participation, and increased stature for the representative institutions. In most instances, the end result was an expansion of governmental power. But in trying to expand
their revenue bases, some regimes unleashed forces beyond their control—in France, a revolution.

The United States began life as a nation with the sort of broadly based revenue system that European kingdoms reached only after centuries of trial and error. Local, state, and federal governments relied heavily upon ordinary citizens for their financial needs from the earliest days of the Republic. Even before the American Revolution, the governments of the thirteen colonies had already established mechanisms to expand their revenue bases. Colonial property taxes weighed most heavily upon farmers, whose property could be easily evaluated. In addition, most colonies also levied poll taxes. In colonial Massachusetts, for example, a person was valued at £20 and taxed at a rate of a penny per pound. 23

The combination of property and poll taxes extended the reach of colonial taxpayers, but these taxes gave common citizens a substantial measure of political influence. Although most colonial legislatures were dominated by relatively small elites, ordinary taxpayers could threaten not to pay their taxes. Organized tax resistance was relatively common during the colonial period, and colonial governments lacked the military force to deal with it. They were compelled, as a result, to pay attention to the views of farmers, tradesmen, and small-property owners who might not command the prestige to hold seats in colonial legislatures but had the capacity to deprive the government of badly needed revenues. Tax resistance in Pennsylvania, for example, forced the colony’s government to develop a more equitable system of property taxation in the early eighteenth century. After the Revolution, Shays’ Rebellion in 1787 and the 1794 Whiskey Rebellion carried on the colonial tradition of taxpayer recalcitrance.

To avoid provoking their testy taxpayers, the more imaginative among the colonial governments sought to raise cash by issuing interest-bearing certificates of indebtedness in small denominations. Eventually, these came to circulate as paper money. According to Margaret Myers, colonial Massachusetts was the first government in modern history to issue paper money. 24 In the aftermath of King William’s War (1689–1697), the colonial government was bankrupt and unable to borrow money. The government also lacked the coercive mechanisms needed to enforce tax increases in the face of what was certain to be substantial popular resistance. In 1690, the colony printed £7,000 in interest-bearing, redeemable certificates of indebtedness with which to fulfill its obligations. During the ensuing decades, new issues brought the total value of certificates in circulation to £194,000.

The smallest denomination of these Massachusetts certificates was £50, which limited their circulation. In the 1720s, however, New York
issued interest-bearing £25 notes, and Pennsylvania produced £12 notes. These small notes made a large fraction of those involved in the cash economy de facto holders of government bonds. By the 1730s, most of the colonies had begun to circulate certificates of indebtedness in ever smaller denominations. For example, beginning in 1750, Maryland began to issue $1, $2, $4, and $6 notes. By the time of the Revolution, debt certificates, denominated in both pounds and dollars, were commonly used as paper money and had actually replaced coin as the country’s primary medium of exchange. One contemporary observer estimated that by 1776, paper money constituted nearly 60 percent of the £12 million in circulation.25

Reliance upon widely distributed certificates of indebtedness was one of the factors that forced colonial governments to pay attention to the views of ordinary citizens. If a government lost public confidence, its notes would no longer be accepted and its ability to meet its obligations would be threatened. For example, the pacifist sentiments of its Quaker citizens compelled the government of Pennsylvania to pledge that none of its paper money issues would be used for any form of military expenditure.

After the Revolution and the construction of the federal government in 1789, the states continued to rely upon broadly based property and poll taxes as their major revenue sources. Initially, the federal government financed its limited activities through tariffs and customs duties, supplemented by moderate borrowing in national and international credit markets. During the Civil War, however, the need for revenues increased so dramatically that the government could not secure sufficient funds from the traditional sources—domestic banks and financiers. European investors, for their part, had no confidence that the Union would prevail on the battlefield and were reluctant to purchase U.S. securities.26

The federal government therefore turned to new forms of revenue extraction, including excise taxes on manufactured goods, a tax on incomes, bond sales to small investors, and the issue of a variety of legal tender notes, some interest bearing and some not, in small denominations. All these revenue devices depended upon a measure of popular acceptance and left the government financially dependent upon popular confidence to meet the Union’s military expenses, which ultimately totaled more than $4 billion. By the end of the war, excise and income taxes had produced more than $1.2 billion in revenues. A moderately progressive income tax was enacted in 1862. A levy of 3 percent was imposed on all incomes below $10,000, with the rate rising to 5 percent on incomes above that level. In 1864 and 1865, the income tax act was
amended, eventually providing for rates of 5 percent on incomes below $5,000 and 10 percent for those earning more than that amount.\textsuperscript{27}

A third major revenue instrument introduced during the Civil War was the sale of government bonds to small investors. In 1862, Treasury Secretary Salmon P. Chase invited Ohio Republican banker Jay Cooke to attempt to place $500 million in government bonds that could not be sold to domestic banks or foreign investors. Cooke developed a plan to market these securities to ordinary citizens who had never before purchased government bonds. He thought he could appeal to the patriotism of ordinary Americans, and he believed that widespread ownership of government bonds would give large numbers of ordinary citizens a greater concern for their nation’s welfare.\textsuperscript{28} Cooke established a network of twenty-five hundred sales agents throughout the North and used the press to promote the notion that purchasing government securities was both a patriotic duty and a wise investment. In every community, Republican party organizations worked hand in hand with Cooke’s sales agents, providing what historian Eric McKitrick calls the “continual affirmation of purpose” needed to sustain popular support and the regime’s finances through four long years of war.\textsuperscript{29} By 1863, all the bonds had been sold, and most were in the hands of private citizens rather than financial institutions.

A final revenue instrument introduced during the war was the issue of $450 million in legal tender notes. Some of these so-called greenbacks bore interest, and others could be redeemed for twenty-year government bonds. The bulk of the greenbacks, however, were unredeemable “fiat money.” Issued in the form of payment on existing government debt, the greenbacks constituted an interest-free loan from the general public to the government. After the war, the constitutionality of federally issued paper money was challenged and, eventually, upheld by the Supreme Court.\textsuperscript{30}

The revenue instruments devised during the Civil War became important parts of the national government’s revenue-collection efforts during the ensuing decades. The income tax was declared unconstitutional by the Supreme Court in 1895 and then reinstated by the Sixteenth Amendment in 1913. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, business and financial interests, along with the Republican party that spoke for them, opposed the income tax and advocated financing the federal government through the sale of large-denomination bonds. Bondholders, unlike taxpayers, derived private profit from financing the operations of the federal government, and a government sustained by bonds tended to be attentive to the institutions and people who bought bonds.
Populists, most Democrats, and some liberal Republicans, in contrast, supported the income tax, especially one with a progressive rate structure. It made the government financially dependent upon the great mass of ordinary Americans and shifted influence away from the banks, financiers, and elite bondholders, who accrued interest and political influence at the same time. If federal borrowing was required, Populists and most Democrats favored bonds in small denominations that could be purchased by ordinary citizens rather than fat cats.

The debate between the proponents of alternative modes of public finance came to a head during World War I, when the Wilson administration overcame congressional opposition and moved to raise a large part of the war’s expenses through increased taxation. In his April 1917 message to a special session of Congress, the president said it was the government’s duty to “protect our people . . . against the hardships and evils . . . that would be produced by vast loans.” As a result, the financing of World War I was at least partially consistent with the Democratic and Populist perspective. First, the income tax played an important role in financing American participation in World War I. A tax on incomes that by 1918 reached 6 percent on the first $4,000 in income and 12 percent on the remainder generated nearly one-third of the $33 billion in military and related costs incurred by the United States during the war. The remainder of the expense of the war was financed by corporate taxes, excise taxes, and, especially, government borrowing.

Using marketing techniques similar to those devised by Jay Cooke during the Civil War, the government urged Americans, through “borrow and buy” campaigns, to participate in what were designated “Liberty Loans” and “Victory Loans.” Four Liberty and Victory Loan campaigns generated an astonishing $22 billion for the war effort. Bonds were sold in denominations as low as $50, and purchase on an installment plan was allowed. The Liberty and Victory Loan campaigns were conducted by the War Loan Organization, which was organized into sales, speaking, and publicity bureaus. The entire sales network was staffed by tens of thousands of ordinary citizens who volunteered to work in coordination with local banks. Another $1 billion was raised by the sale of thrift stamps, war savings certificates, and small bonds in schools, post offices, and factories to those sufficiently patriotic but too impecunious to participate in the Liberty Loan drive. Stamps cost as little as twenty-five cents each. A sheet of sixteen thrift stamps could be exchanged for an interest-bearing $5 bond. Stamps and savings certificates were also sold by an army of civilian volunteers.

Despite this resemblance to Civil War–era bond sales, the government did not rely entirely upon the patriotic ardor of ordinary citizens to
market its securities. With the creation of the Federal Reserve System in 1913 and the designation of the Federal Reserve as the Treasury’s fiscal agent in 1915, the United States government had greatly increased its borrowing capabilities. To support wartime financing, the Federal Reserve established a preferential discount rate on loans to member banks secured by government obligations. Funds borrowed by the banks were, in turn, used to promote installment loans to the public for the purchase of war bonds. In essence, the Federal Reserve System provided the economy with enough money to ensure that the bond sales would be a success.\textsuperscript{35} Patriotism was bolstered by institutional innovation and a carefully conceived economic policy. Ordinary citizens played an important role in financing World War I, but the emergence of the Federal Reserve marked the advent of a new era in which institutional regularity would gradually replace reliance upon popular enthusiasm in public finance.

Taxes and borrowing rose once more during the Great Depression and even more dramatically after the nation entered World War II in 1941. World War II marked a watershed in government finance. First, the Revenue Act of 1942 substantially broadened the nation’s tax base, increasing the number of households subject to the income tax from 13 million to 28 million. By 1944, tax rates began at 3 percent on incomes between $500 and $2,000, rose to 20 percent for incomes above $2,000 and climbed steeply to reach a nominal rate of 91 percent on income higher than $200,000.\textsuperscript{36}

The second important innovation associated with the war was the enactment of the Current Tax Payment Act of 1943. Before 1943, federal income taxes were to be paid quarterly in the year after the income was received. This system depended heavily upon the honesty, good will, and foresight of individual taxpayers. Under the terms of the 1943 act, however, employers were required to withhold 20 percent of wages and salaries and to remit these to the government as the income was earned.

The 1943 Current Tax Payment Act partially freed the government from its historic dependence upon the support and integrity of the individual taxpayer. The act made the collection of income taxes automatic and involuntary from the perspective of the taxpayer and, together with higher rates, increased federal income tax revenues from slightly more than $1 billion in 1940 to just under $20 billion by 1944. While making greater demands on citizens, the Treasury thus reduced its dependence upon citizen compliance.

World War II also brought a great enhancement of the government’s capacity to market and manage debt. The savings bond program was one element in this expansion. During the course of the war, some $50 bil-
lion in U.S. savings bonds were sold to individual citizens. Patriotic appeals organized by the War Finance Division of the Treasury Department and backed by mailings of more than 650 million pieces of advertising encouraged workers to enroll in the payroll savings plan. Under this scheme, workers agreed to have approximately 10 percent of their income automatically deducted from their paychecks and invested in savings bonds. Like taxation, the purchase of government securities became an automatic process requiring no continuing citizen effort. By the end of the war, nearly 28 million workers were participating in the plan, resulting in automatic monthly bond purchases of roughly $500 million.

Savings bonds sold to ordinary workers accounted for approximately one-third of the funds borrowed by the U.S. Treasury during World War II. The remainder, some $135 billion, was raised by marketing securities to individual investors, corporations, and banks. As was the case during World War I, government bond drives were marked by a great deal of patriotic hoopla, often centered around appeals by film stars, war heroes, and other celebrities. At the same time, however, the actual machinery for marketing government securities had become much less reliant upon the patriotism of individual citizens than had been the case during World War I.

As before, the Federal Reserve System served as the Treasury’s sales agent for securities. The scope and character of Federal Reserve activities, however, changed substantially during World War II. Beginning in the 1920s, the Federal Reserve system had initiated open market operations, through which it regulated the supply of money by buying and selling government securities. When necessary, it could also print money to finance its bond purchases. In 1942, the twelve Federal Reserve banks began a policy of purchasing, at a fixed rates, all government securities offered to them. The fact that government securities could be sold to the Fed at this support price made them totally liquid and the equivalent of interest-bearing money. This policy assured the success of all government bond sales by giving banks and investors every reason to purchase government securities, since they could be easily resold at guaranteed prices. In the process, however, the Fed also diminished the government’s dependence upon the patriotism and support of individual citizens to finance its enormous wartime borrowing needs.

Broadly based taxes and small-denomination securities once allowed the federal government to finance its survival without subordinating itself to powerful financial interests. And by distributing its taxes and bonds into the hands of so many of its citizens, the government acquired a tangible incentive to fulfill the promise of democracy. To collect its taxes and sell its bonds, it needed widespread popular compliance and
support, which could be sustained only if government remained attentive to public sentiment and values. Hence the historic relationship between taxation and representation. Even before this principle became a cause of revolution, the colonial governments of British America were sensitive to the possibilities of tax resistance. They resorted to debt instruments as a way to circumvent the need for tax compliance, only to find that they had created another kind of dependence upon popular support.

The tax system itself reflected the government’s concern about its credibility with the public at large. The principle of progressivity, enshrined in American tax law since the Revenue Act of 1862, was a concession to the popular sense of justice. According to tax historian Sidney Ratner, progressivity accompanied the extension of new and relatively high rates of taxation to citizens with small incomes. In principle, at least, the handful of wealthy Americans had to be taxed at even higher rates in order to convince tens of millions of their less prosperous fellow citizens that the tax system was fair and that they should comply with its demands.

The progressivity of the income tax has been weakened significantly since the 1980s—one more sign, perhaps, that the government’s fiscal reliance on the good will of ordinary citizens is waning. But it was not only the great mass of ordinary citizens who lost influence as a result of changes in the methods of tax collection and the marketing of government securities. The distribution of authority within the government has changed as well. From colonial times onward, legislatures gained in political stature because the executive could not levy taxes without their acquiescence. During the Reagan and Bush administrations, however, budget deficits coupled with adamant Republican resistance to any tax increases undercut the fiscal powers of Congress and shifted control of the economy to the Treasury and the Federal Reserve. For the government of the United States, as for most other regimes, the historic problem of revenue collection has been to persuade millions of citizens to pay taxes and purchase government securities. Dependence upon a broad base of taxpayers and modest investors increased governments’ dependence upon popular confidence. These “democratic” measures of public finance paid for America’s independence, its survival, and its victories in two world wars—but to a diminishing extent as time passed.

U.S. savings bonds, the democratic foundation of government finance, have now become occasional birthday presents for grandchildren. They account for less than 1 percent of national debt. The federal tax system has expanded on the collection techniques devised to mini-
mize its dependence on taxpayer cooperation. Of the $2 trillion in federal tax revenues collected every year, about one-half are generated by the personal income tax; and employer withholding, which accounts for approximately 75 percent of this sum, is remitted to the Treasury without any positive act of support or compliance on the part of the individual taxpayers. Another $500 billion is withheld from employees’ paychecks for old-age, disability, and unemployment insurance. As one tax expert noted recently, “Taxpayers who receive only wage, interest and dividend income . . . have virtually no opportunities not to comply with tax requirements.”40 Employers withhold income tax on wages and report it to the Internal Revenue Service on 1099 forms. Computers allow the IRS to match 100 percent of these reports to individuals’ tax returns. For those who receive nonsalary income, the IRS examines the millions of third-party information returns disclosing financial transactions that banks, brokers, and businesses are required to file each year. These information returns are matched by computers to the incomes reported by taxpayers.

In short, the government collects revenues from millions of ordinary citizens without having to worry much about whether they are willing to pay. Tax avoidance has not disappeared, but unpaid taxes represent a very small percentage of the nation’s overall tax obligation. Those few Americans who resist taxation are easily managed through bureaucratic intimidation and the criminal justice system, without calling out the militia—a far cry from the time of Daniel Shays. So too is the financing of government debt, which is no longer a matter of small-denomination bonds and securities peddled with patriotic zeal by thousands of volunteers to millions of citizens. Today it is a quiet matter of bond auctions at Federal Reserve banks with only a few dozen representatives of financial institutions in attendance.

Once, citizens in general played a large and active role in public finance and earned the government’s deference as a consequence. But the gradual development of new arrangements for collecting taxes and financing public debt has reduced government’s financial dependence on citizens, and it has diminished citizenship in the process. How little the government depends upon citizens’ cooperation for its revenues became manifest in October 2001. Some members of Congress proposed that the Treasury issue war bonds to help finance the nation’s war against terrorism and to provide Americans with an outlet for their patriotic sentiments in the wake of terrorist attacks. The Bush administration was cool to the idea. An administration spokesman said it would be better if Americans “put their money to work for the nation” by shopping rather than purchasing securities.41
The End of the Citizen Soldier

Along with administration and raising revenue, a third essential requisite for the modern state is the ability to defend itself militarily. Here too the role of ordinary citizens, once critical to national survival, is now much diminished.

England’s yeoman archers were a formidable presence on medieval battlefields, but the era of the citizen soldier began only at the end of the eighteenth century. Before that time, wars were typically fought by armies of professional soldiers who campaigned for pay and booty. Armies were small by contemporary standards. The eighteenth-century Prussian army, for example, one of the most powerful in Europe, consisted of only 80,000 men. For major campaigns, kings commonly filled out their forces by recruiting mercenary troops. But mercenaries were mere hirelings. Occasionally loyal to their entrepreneurial captains, but seldom to the regime that employed them, they sometimes switched sides in the middle of campaigns. Their commanders tended to regard battle casualties as a capital loss inconsistent with good business practice, a policy powerfully supported by their troops.

These military practices were defeated in battle by the *levee en masse* of the French Revolution. In 1793 it produced 300,000 volunteers and conscripts to defend France and the Revolution. Though scarcely trained and poorly equipped, the French troops fought with an ardor born of devotion to a cause. Under Napoleon, the French nation’s call to its people produced an army of 1.3 million. Its battlefield triumphs converted France from a kingdom to an empire and demonstrated that popular support could be transformed into military power.

For the rest of the nineteenth century, other European governments tried to convince their own subjects to emulate the élan and self-sacrifice of the French troops. Universal military service became the European norm, along with nationalist indoctrination, which was soon extended from soldiers to children by universal compulsory schooling. In time, the expansion of military service led to the development of national pension systems, initially introduced to reward former soldiers and their immediate dependents. And finally there was the right to vote. Proponents of suffrage expansion argued that the franchise would give subjects a sense of ownership in the state and inspire them to fight for their country. A Swedish slogan of the nineteenth century captured the essential connection: “One man, one gun, one vote.” Modern warfare transformed politically voiceless subjects into citizens.

World War I was associated with a great wave of suffrage expansion in Europe and North America as governments sought to mobilize support
for the war effort. In Canada, for example, under the Wartimes Election Act, women with relatives serving in the armed services were given the right to vote for the duration of the war. The government apparently believed that a woman with a vote would have reason to urge her husband, son, or brother to make whatever sacrifice was needed for victory.

While most of Europe still relied on mercenaries and professional soldiers, the British colonies in North America were already fielding armies of ordinary citizens. England had urgent missions for its own professional troops elsewhere and consistently urged the thirteen colonies to provide for their own defense against the French in Canada, the Indians on the frontier, and the Spanish in the South and West. The militia forces organized for these purposes would eventually defeat Britain itself and create a new nation.

Colonial militiamen made up the bulk of Washington’s Continental Army, but their short tours of duty reduced their military effectiveness. Like their French Revolutionary contemporaries, however, the militia’s enthusiasm for the cause often made up for what they lacked in training and discipline. The colonies’ part-time soldiers had other virtues as well. When they returned home, they performed the vital service of holding their communities to the patriot cause, often by intimidation or violence, so that the Continental Army had continuing access to its recruitment base and to most of the food produced in the colonies.

Once independent, the United States continued to rely primarily on militiamen so as to avoid the costs and political risks that a large professional army entailed for a fledgling democracy. The federal Militia Acts of 1792 and 1795 provided for the enrollment of able-bodied, free white men between the ages of eighteen and forty-five in the state militias and authorized the president to call the state militias to national service for a period not to exceed three months in any one year. The statutes carried no penalties for failing to enroll in the militia; nevertheless, thousands of Americans signed up and received some measure of military training.

The militia produced politicians as well as soldiers. Like Abraham Lincoln, many aspiring officeholders without wealth or social standing brought themselves to the attention of fellow citizens through militia service.

Virtually all the American soldiers who fought in the War of 1812 were militiamen. The vast majority served for six months or less, and their military performance was spotty. In some instances, rival units refused to cooperate with one another, and battles were lost because militiamen decided to return home in midcampaign. But militia forces led by able officers like General William Henry Harrison of Kentucky, General Jacob Brown of New York, and, of course, Andrew Jackson were able to
defeat larger, well-trained British forces, thus confirming the American conviction that citizen soldiers could outfight professionals.

After the War of 1812, the organized state militias gave way to local volunteer units that drilled on weekends and paraded in fancy uniforms on patriotic occasions. But some saw military action in civil disturbances, during which they often performed effectively. One volunteer regiment in New York City put down major riots in 1834, 1836, and 1837. On the frontier, volunteer units were responsible for much of the violence against Native Americans, and during the Mexican-American War, they accounted for more than 70 percent of the troops mustered. Despite many casualties, primarily from disease and malnutrition, volunteers and militiamen fought well throughout the twenty-one months of the war and distinguished themselves at Buena Vista. Congress was so pleased with the military performance of the volunteers that it slashed the size of the regular army from 30,000 to 12,000 men at the war's conclusion, calculating that volunteers would always be available to serve the nation's military needs.

At the outbreak of the Civil War, both the Federal and Confederate governments called the state militias into service. In 1861, President Lincoln asked the states to send 75,000 soldiers to serve for three months under officers appointed by the state governors. As the war continued, the president called for more troops to be raised by the states. The Civil War's bloody consumption of manpower, however, soon outran the supply of state volunteers. In July 1862, facing severe manpower shortfalls, Congress took the unprecedented step of directing the states to draft soldiers to fill their quotas. In 1863, for the first time, the national government, rather than the states and communities, sought to mobilize citizen soldiers. Congress enacted a conscription law summoning young men directly into the military service of the United States. Those ordered to report were permitted to hire substitutes. Only some 160,000 draftees and substitutes ever served in the Union army, but many tens of thousands of men volunteered in preference to being drafted. Counting militiamen, conscripts, volunteers, and “involuntary volunteers,” more than 2 million citizen soldiers fought in the Union army and another million on the Confederate side.

In the aftermath of the Civil War, the Southern states were initially prohibited from organizing militia units. Once Republicans took control of the Southern state governments, however, Congress authorized the formation of new state militia units. Composed largely of African American enlisted men and white officers—often carpetbaggers—these units were disparaged by Southern whites as “black and tan” militias. Acting outside the law, the whites formed their own militia companies,
generally composed of Confederate veterans. These units engaged in a campaign of terror and intimidation against African American militiamen, killing many of their leaders. In the closing days of Reconstruction, the official and extralegal militias fought a number of pitched battles, with casualties on both sides, before the South’s Republican regimes crumbled.49

Beginning in the 1870s, the states reorganized their militia units and renamed them the National Guard. By 1900, state guard units had enrolled a total of 114,000 men. Five states supported entire divisions, twenty-five supported brigades, and the others supported at least one regiment apiece. Despite the word “national,” the guard units were controlled by the states and were used by the state governors primarily to suppress civil disorder. Between the end of Reconstruction and the beginning of World War I, governors summoned the guard units more than five hundred times to end race riots, quell religious disputes, and intervene in political conflicts. During the great period of strikes and labor unrest between the 1870s and 1890s, the guard was often used to protect industrial property and disperse strikers. Though guardsmen were citizen soldiers drawn from all classes of society, the officers were almost invariably members of the well-to-do classes who had little sympathy for strikers. As a result, the National Guard became notorious for its use of violence against labor protestors. During the 1894 Pullman strike, for example, the Second Illinois Regiment fired into a crowd, killing more than twenty strikers and wounding many more.

The association of the National Guard with strikebreaking and violence led to demands that it be reorganized or even disbanded—demands supported by the officer corps of the regular army, which saw the guard as a rival and resented the system of political promotions that made untrained civilians colonels and generals. But it was the Spanish-American War that first undermined the guard’s autonomy. At the war’s start, Congress passed the Volunteer Act, which created regiments of national volunteers who would, after training, become units of the regular army. They would make up part of the expeditionary force. The guard would defend the coast.

After some political maneuver, however, the act was amended so that state National Guard units could volunteer en masse for combat duty while retaining their identities. A number of guard units entered the service through this route, but most saw their identities diluted as the regular army required them to add new men, usually from outside their home states, to bring units up to regulation strength. The Volunteer Act also gave the president, rather than the state governors, the power to appoint all general officers and their staffs. As a result, the National Guard units
came to be more fully integrated within the army. Most of the Americans who served during the war were citizen soldiers. More than 233,000 volunteers entered federal service, as compared to a regular army of slightly more than 30,000 men. Nevertheless, citizen soldiers had been subordinated to the professionals.

After the war, the 1903 Dick Act formalized the subordination of the guard to the national army. The act declared that the National Guard constituted the organized militia of the United States rather than merely a congeries of state forces. The administration and organization of all state guard units was required to conform to that of the regular army, and the guard was to be issued arms and equipment by the federal government. The president was authorized to summon state guard units for federal service for a period of up to nine months. Under the act, once a unit entered the federal service it lost its identity as a state force and became part of the regular army’s volunteer forces. In essence, during periods of military necessity, the guard would serve as a recruitment base for volunteers who would then become integrated into the United States Army.

The nationalization of the guard advanced further with the National Defense Act of 1916. It allowed states to retain their responsibility for training guard units, and the guard continued to be available to governors for in civil emergencies. In time of war, however, guardsmen could be drafted into the federal service for the duration. The president was given the authority to appoint all commissioned officers and noncommissioned officers for men so drafted. At the same time, the act began the creation of today’s military reserves by authorizing the establishment of a force consisting of soldiers who had completed a tour of active duty. These were to be former regular army soldiers with no ties to the states or to the National Guard. This subordination of the guard and the creation of the prototype for the modern military reserves clearly signaled a declining role for the citizen soldier in the United States.

The American army that fought in World War I was primarily composed of draftees. More than 24 million men registered under the 1917 Selective Service Act, and nearly 3 million were drafted. Another 700,000 young Americans volunteered for service, and 370,000 soldiers were drawn from the National Guard. Guardsmen were drafted by Wilson in August 1917 as individuals, which formally severed their ties with the states. Most guard units were merged with other units and lost their identities and community ties. In July 1918, the army chief of staff, General Peyton March, completed the integration of the guard into the regular army in his General Order 73, which declared, “This country has but one army, the army of the United States.” Guardsmen were prohibited from attaching any state insignia to their uniforms. Henceforth, “U.S.” was to
be the only indication of an American soldier's civic affiliation. The community-based militias that had won independence and crushed secession had given way to a nationally conscripted military force—an army of strangers.

At the same time, however, the federal government sought the support of local communities to reduce anticipated political opposition to conscription. To this end, the actual task of inducted draftees was entrusted to forty-six hundred local boards of citizen volunteers. Additional citizens’ committees gave medical and legal advice and assisted inductees until they reported for duty. As a result, the creation of the World War I army was based on a mix of national recruiting drives aimed at stimulating patriotism, and local administration designed to elicit community cooperation for the war effort.

Like World War I, World War II was fought by an army of conscripted and volunteer citizen soldiers with state guard units providing only a small fraction the nation’s forces. Congress enacted the first peacetime draft in American history in 1940. During the next five years, 10 million men were inducted into the armed forces, and another 5 million were given deferments for work in war industries. Another 5 million Americans, including more than 300,000 women, volunteered for service, prompted by the same mix of patriotism and anticipation of conscription that produced the original *levee en masse*. Community boards once again took on the work of conscription and the goal of cultivating grassroots support for the Selective Service System.

Postwar legislation, however, further diminished the status of community-based military units and the role of citizen soldiers themselves. The 1952 Armed Forces Reserve Act created a Ready Reserve consisting of all members of the Army and Air National Guards as well as all those with unfulfilled reserve obligations. The act not only reduced the distinction between the National Guard and the reserves but also virtually converted the National Guard from a state force into another component of the national reserve forces.

During the two major postwar conflicts, the wars in Korea and Vietnam, reserve and National Guard forces played virtually no role. Fewer than 2 percent of the soldiers who fought in Korea were drawn from the guard and reserves. In the case of Vietnam, President Johnson decided that sending draftees to fight in an unpopular war might arouse less political resistance than sending reservists—many of them family men with strong community ties. Popular opposition to the war, however, spilled over into widespread draft resistance—one factor contributing to the conversion of the American military into an all-volunteer professional force. Military planners would later argue that the technical com-
plexity of the new weapon systems required a highly trained, professional army rather than a force composed of short-term conscripts. By the time large numbers of reservists were once again called to duty, this time in the 1990 Persian Gulf War, they were mainly former members of the standing military rather than true citizen soldiers.

Community-based units of citizen soldiers have finally disappeared from the nation’s military. Some experts, in fact, argue that new weapon systems will make massed troops obsolete. Future wars, they assert, will be fought by computers and “smart” weapons. The American-led NATO attack on Serbia in 1999 seemed to foreshadow a new era of war without casualties. The campaign depended entirely upon “smart” missiles and bombs launched from ships and aircraft that generally remained out of the range of enemy fire. President Clinton made no appeals for citizen sacrifice and assured the American people that none of their soldiers would be hurt in the fighting. The American military effort in Afghanistan in 2001–2002 similarly depended mainly upon advanced technology and devastating air power; few Americans were actually sent into dangerous situations.

Citizens once entered the nation’s service accompanied by their friends and neighbors, tied to one another and to particular parts of the country. They were not solitary conscripts who stood alone in the face of military authority. They were in a position to make demands and to command respect. Not surprisingly, the government’s reliance upon citizen soldiers was closely associated with the expansion of voting rights and with the construction of the nation’s public welfare system. Theda Skocpol has shown that the system of veterans’ pensions established after the Civil War may have anticipated the development of America’s welfare state. At its peak, not long after the turn of the century, Civil War pensions provided support not only to veterans but to their widows as well.

Militiamen called to place their lives at the service of the nation thought themselves just as entitled to vote as those who risked only property. The revolutionary militia was known as a breeding ground for radical democrats. In 1776, the Philadelphia Committee of Privates, an organization of Pennsylvania militiamen, advised voters, “Let no man represent you disposed to form any rank above that of Freeman.” The sentiments of armed militia men could not be ignored in the suffrage debates that followed the success of the revolutionary cause. Throughout the colonies, citizen soldiers pressed for and helped to win expanded voting rights. Organizations of state militiamen demanded an end to property restrictions on the suffrage on the ground that those asked to fight should not be barred from voting. In Maryland, groups of armed militiamen went to the polls in 1776 demanding to vote whether or not they
could meet the state’s existing property requirements for voters. In some instances, those denied the right to vote threatened to refuse to continue to fight. The result in Maryland and other states was a general expansion of the suffrage during the revolutionary period, an expansion designed to accommodate the demands of those Americans being asked to fight. The War of 1812 led to suffrage reforms in a number of states on the argument that “men who were good enough to fight were good enough to vote.” Women’s suffrage in the United States, as in England and Canada, was partially brought about by World war I, on the basis of the notion that women were more likely to support the war effort if they possessed the right to vote. Most recently, the Twenty-Sixth Amendment, lowering the voting age to eighteen, was designed in part to bolster support among young men who were then being conscripted for service in the Vietnam War. It may have been the last feeble gesture acknowledging that soldiering and citizenship went hand in hand.

The Decline and Fall of the Citizen

No antidemocratic onslaught will be found responsible for the decline and fall of the American citizen. Behind the general political demobilization of the past several decades stand mostly good intentions—even democratic ones. The diminution of citizenship has, in many cases, followed as an unforeseen consequence of efforts to improve the effectiveness and responsiveness of government. Several generations of military reformers—beginning with General George Washington—viewed the citizen soldier as inferior to the well-trained and well-disciplined professional fighting man. General Emory Upton, one of the army’s most influential strategists during the late nineteenth century, was assigned to study military tactics and formations in Europe and Asia. Upton’s great work, The Military Policy of the United States, published in 1904, was designed to show that professional military forces under centralized bureaucratic control were inherently superior to armies based upon citizen soldiers. Upton’s work influenced the views of the American officer corps for the next half century.

Practices designed to make the nation’s government and economy operate more smoothly have diminished the space in which citizenship can operate. Civil service reform, income-tax withholding, and the open-market operations of the Federal Reserve System were all compellingly reasonable innovations. All reduced the government’s reliance upon the active and collective cooperation of its people.

In making citizens expendable, the government did not exclude them. But it included them on new terms. Beginning with the Progres-
sive reformers of the late nineteenth century, collective participation in politics was gradually replaced by individual access. Initiative, referendum, recall, and the direct election of U.S. senators seemed straightforward advances in the inexorable progress of mass democracy that was born in revolution and grew along with the country itself. But the Progressive ideal emphasized the solitary and independent citizen, the self-mobilizing citizen. Progressive democracy attempted to dispense with the party organizations that had been the chief vehicles for the collective mobilization of the public. Collective mobilization gradually evolved into the selective mobilization of personal democracy. The administrative, financial, and military needs of the government no longer required the political engagement of the general population.

The declining dependence of the government upon the allegiance of its citizens marks the end of the political era that began with the French and American Revolutions. Governments can fight wars, collect revenues, and administer programs without having to rely much upon the collective and active support of millions of ordinary people. Indeed, in some respects, enthusiastic citizens have come to be seen as a hindrance rather than a help. In recent military conflicts such as the Kosovo War and even the Persian Gulf War, the U.S. government deliberately avoided stirring up popular enthusiasm because doing so would have made it more difficult to limit the wars’ objectives to the narrow ones deemed consistent with America’s interests.

Americans do not seem to be in immediate danger of losing the formal rights they won in an earlier political epoch. The vestigial organs of citizenship can survive long after their original purposes have evaporated. The Roman Senate, after all, survived long after the death of the Republic that gave it meaning and even after the collapse of the Western Empire that had given it ritualized recognition. Today, the institutions of popular democracy persist and continue to command the obligatory respect of politicians and officials. But they are being displaced by the institutions of personal democracy, and a critical dimension of citizenship is disappearing. To an increasing extent, ordinary citizens deal with government one by one, and forfeit the influence that they once enjoyed as members of a mobilized public.