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Calvert, Robert E.

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POLITICAL "REALISM" AND
THE PROGRESSIVE DEGRADATION
OF CITIZENSHIP: A QUIET
CONSTITUTIONAL CRISIS

ROBERT E. CALVERT

The great Statesman, like the great moral leader, is one who appeals to the
higher emotions, to principle, to self-restraint, not to selfishness and appetite.
—A. Lawrence Lowell

I'll tell you what wins votes. Whatever puts money in here [his wallet] wins
votes, and whatever takes money out of here loses votes.
—George Bush

A political actor, be he good or evil, does not deal in unreality. Rather, he cre­
ates realities that matter . . . An actor not only projects, he causes his audi­
ence to project certain qualities.
—George Will

If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences.
—W. I. Thomas

It sometimes happens in the public life of a nation that a casual, off­
hand remark by a political figure reveals with stark clarity one of the
master assumptions not only of his or her entourage, party, or class,
but, more or less, of the age. Such a moment occurred during the
1984 presidential campaign. Speaking to "about 2,000 cheering Re­
publicans" in Ohio in the midst of the campaign, Vice-President George Bush suggested that Ohioans felt themselves to be part of a national economic recovery brought about by the Reagan administration. Then, in what must have been a theatrical moment, Mr. Bush removed his wallet from his pocket and declared, quoting James Rhodes, a former governor of Ohio, that the only issue in a campaign is the "pocketbook"—"who is putting money in and who is taking it out." "One reason Ronald Reagan is going to get re-elected," he predicted, "is because he's putting something in and the other people are taking something out."

This striking display of tough-minded political realism did not escape the notice of Geraldine Ferraro, Mr. Bush's opponent. Ms. Ferraro was quick to attack Bush's way of making his point—brandishing his wallet—as well as the point itself, charging that "that single gesture of selfishness tells us more about the true character of this administration than all their apple pie."

For all anyone cared—the incident was not widely reported and provoked no editorial comment—Bush could have ignored Ferraro's charge. This was hardly the first time the Reagan administration had been attacked for encouraging, often by its own example, the purely self-regarding instincts of the American people. The great wave of indifference with which the vice-president's remark was met suggested that the nation had lost its capacity to be shocked. Yet "selfishness" is a strong word, and the vice-president evidently thought it could not go unanswered. Ignoring the thrust of Ferraro's charge, Bush countered that

the opposition goes around buying off every single special interest group in sight with promises our nation can't afford. And then they get all ... preachy about selfishness. If they're talking about greed, they ought to talk about the greed of big government, which under the last administration knew absolutely no bounds.

Continuing as though Ferraro had maligned the American voter, he defended not the Reagan administration, the object of Ferraro's attack, but the American people:

The opposition talks as if it were immoral to want to take care of your own family, loved ones, and work toward the good life and maybe buy a new car or get a mortgage on a house or save up for your children's education. We've got news for them—
that is the American dream. There's nothing wrong about it at all; freedom, opportunity, family, faith, fair play—that's what America is all about. And if they don't understand it, it's too darn bad.³

Returning to the issue at the end of the campaign, Ferraro directly disputed Bush's emphasis on voter self-interest:

George Bush has said this election is only about putting money in the voters' wallets. Of course we care about money, but that's only one thing, not everything, Americans care about. We care about peace, equal opportunity, and the one thing our opponents just don't understand is that we care about each other.⁴

I

What are we to make of the Bush-Rhodes view of the American voter and of the correlative conception of the American Dream? We might begin by noting again that despite the gravity of such issues, especially as the nation moved toward the Bicentennial of its Constitution, this exchange between Bush and Ferraro received virtually no attention at the time, either from the news media, other political figures, or interested onlookers. Possibly it seemed to be commonplace campaign rhetoric, merely a reiteration of hackneyed themes by both sides and hence "not news."

The themes of that campaign aside, it is surely not news that voters will reward the party in power if times are good and punish it if times are hard, or that Americans in general do have the aspirations Bush sums up as the American Dream. Democrats as well as Republicans, liberals as well as conservatives know these basic facts of American political life. Nor is it remarkable that the typical American can be held to have a practical, or "utilitarian," bent when it comes to life in general and to government in particular. These familiar facts would seem to make of the vice-president's pronouncements something like truisms—again, not worth reporting.

Reporters might at least have noticed, however, that such "realism" about what moves voters has rarely been articulated so openly by a politician of Mr. Bush's elevated status, certainly not in recent times. For a parallel, one would have to return to 1920s Normalcy or to the cynicism and crassness of the Gilded Age, only to find that even in those nadirs of the American public spirit the politicians of
the day tried to keep up at least the appearance of high-mindedness. What seems new, even shocking, about the vice-president’s assertion, when seen against the backdrop of American history and political culture, is that it is so candid, indeed brazen; so stripped of euphemism; so indifferent, say, to the question of social justice or to ideology or party loyalty; so totally devoid of any gesture toward civic responsibility; so exclusively centered on what has been only a part of the traditional meaning assigned to membership in the American polity and of the rights, obligations, and expectations associated with that membership. In a couple of sentences and one theatrical gesture, the vice-president had reduced American citizenship, a complex political and moral status with a rich history, to a single, material, individualistic, and self-regarding dimension.

It will not do to try to soften the impact of the statement about wallets by invoking the family and the American Dream. Mr. Bush’s victory in that unremarked little debate seems only to provide substance for some of Tocqueville’s worst fears about American egalitarian individualism, apprehensions inspired precisely because this new phenomenon, the individualist, retreated to his “little society” of “family and friends” and left society at large to fend for itself. Look to see in the vice-president’s understanding of the American Dream, with its foundation exclusively in economic self-interest, whether there is any room for the American democratic penchant for political freedom, or for the cultivation of those institutions and beliefs that for Tocqueville served as a barrier to majority tyranny and administrative despotism, or for the doctrine of “self-interest properly understood.” Where in this picture of the family-as-consumption-unit can one discern the political tie that once was thought to bind Americans into a republic? In this truncated version of our public philosophy there is only one positive reference to anything having to do with government and politics—a fleeting mention of a providing (if not providential) president a grateful people will surely return to power, a paternal presence looming benignly and remotely over a prospering nation. Surely Tocqueville would not have been reassured by the spectacle of such a people governed by such a figure as he pondered the health and prospects of American democracy.

Having said all this, I want immediately to caution critics of George Bush and his administration against deriving comfort from the analysis I present here; if what I say has any merit, we confront in this particular expression a point of view very much in the mainstream of contemporary American political culture. I hope in what follows to show why it is indeed so commonplace in our time to see
Realism" and the Degradation of Citizenship

voters not as citizens but as “individuals” concerned only with their own economic well-being and, similarly, why it is so easy to describe the American Dream as utterly lacking political content. There should be no comfort in this for any of us.\(^6\)

It is already evident that this now-conventional voter, and the correlative vision of the American Dream, could be cited by the other essayists in this volume as disturbing confirmation that their concerns for the well-being of American constitutional democracy are not imaginary. Such a voter may be seen to represent the triumph of Jefferson’s hedonistic or humanist liberalism, as David Greenstone sees it, over the reformed or public-spirited liberalism of John Adams. Such a voter represents in principle the final privatization and emancipation of Michael Walzer’s “protestant” individual from any and all restraints, including the inevitable restraints of democratic politics—to the point that both of Walzer’s texts of the Constitution would seem to be irrelevant. We have an awful caricature of Jean Elshtain’s “exquisitely social” individual, then, the sort of “citizen” who, devoted only to personal and family welfare, will find incomprehensible the notion of a common good urged by Robert Bellah. Indeed, given the self-absorbed preoccupation with consumption, it is hard to imagine a voter so oriented as the individual filled with the spirit of enterprise important to Michael Novak.

We are partially reassured on hearing, from Michael Walzer, that these images of a thoroughly privatized citizen and an impoverished politics are only tendencies and not accomplished facts, an observation that applies, fortunately, with even greater force to the vice-president’s conception of what wins elections. I say this because it is important to note that Bush’s statement about why voters vote as they do is, in our time anyway, false—not an overgeneralization, not an exaggeration of the truth, not an overstatement of a basically sound analysis, but, in its unqualified form, simply and radically false.\(^7\)

If the point were only that most Americans, most of the time, tend to decide whom to vote for on the basis of how they are faring economically—or even that they generally allow their economic position to eclipse other and competing interests and concerns they may have as citizens as they cast their votes—one could cite much evidence in support of that position. But that is not the position of those who speak in this vein.

The vice-president, for example, is not generalizing about voter behavior as a political scientist might—indeed, is not making an “empirical statement” or presenting a “refutable hypothesis” at all.
Rather, it would seem, instead of bad political science, the assertion about the pocketbook voter is something quite different. On the one hand, candidate Bush, on the stump, is articulating what must be seen as some rather conventional American folk wisdom about how people behave in politics, saying "what everybody knows," with the confident assurance that what he says will be well received. He is communicating with his audience on the basis of what in Parsonian sociology is called a shared "belief system." On the other hand, his unqualified assertion about what moves the voter can also be seen as a kind of philosophical or theoretical claim, a declaration indeed about "human nature" in politics; his voter is reminiscent of the "natural man" imagined by the great social-contract thinkers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, who in one way or other made a point of telling us, as Rousseau said, to "lay facts aside" in understanding what they were about. In neither case, whether folk wisdom or crude political philosophy, is Bush's statement such as to be considered more or less true when measured against the facts, against what actual people actually do. It would not have occurred to the vice-president to offer evidence for his claim about the significance of the pocketbook in elections or for anyone in his audience to ask for it.

Whatever the ontological status of the kind of voter revealed in Bush's remark, he seems more than vaguely familiar. We think we have met him before, or at any rate some version of him, his ancestor, so to speak, in other times in American history and not only as Tocqueville's individualist or as a shade of the Grant or Harding eras. Indeed, so American does he seem that he may be thought to have come over on the Mayflower. Surely John Winthrop was speaking to that kind of person, or to that person in each of his listeners, as he laid out his "Modell of Christian Charity" on board the Arbella—warning of the fate that would befall them if they "fell to embrace this world" and lost sight of the main (but not the only) reason they had come to New England. Winthrop again might be thought to have confronted the ancestor of the late twentieth-century voter when he reminded his constituents, in his famous "Speech to the General Court," that "natural" liberty, the liberty to do just as you please without regard for what is right or for the well-being of others, is a false and pernicious kind of liberty and quite incompatible with the natural and moral necessity of living together in communities.

The American revolutionaries were no less aware of a forerunner of this creature as they asserted, anxiously if bravely, that as individ-
ual citizens and as a people they were capable of the self-discipline, public spiritedness, devotion to the public good—in a word, the republican virtue—required of them if they were to govern themselves without a king. Building on their Puritan heritage and blending it with the republicanism of Machiavelli and Montesquieu and the Whiggism of eighteenth-century England, their elaborate paeans of praise to republican virtue bespoke as well their fear of their own proclivities for selfish, antirepublican, and unpatriotic kinds of vice.

Perhaps, we think, we can most clearly see the kind of citizen the vice-president seemed to have in mind in Madison's doleful speculations on "human nature," as he and the other Framers struggled to fashion a constitution suitable for a people fallen, as it were, from republican grace—a people, they believed, whose civic virtue had at best been much exaggerated. When Madison contemplated ordinary Americans—the majority of his countrymen—he was less impressed by their willingness to sacrifice their personal interests for the common good than by their willingness to "vex and oppress each other" in their own interest. Left to their own devices, which included, Madison believed, a conception of republicanism imperfectly grounded in human nature and a correspondingly chaotic politics, the noble ideals of the Revolution seemed fated for disaster.

Yet for all the apparent familiarity, we really do not find the solitary, purely self-interested individual in Puritanism, in revolutionary republicanism, or in Madisonian constitutional theory. At best we find him in these earlier American conceptions of the human person only as an intimation, a constant and fearful possibility, the dark side of the soul, embedded in and hence merely a dimension of a whole human being—a threat to the very life of the "errand into the wilderness," the Revolution, the Republic and also a challenge to religion, to revolutionary zeal and practice, to republican education, and to statecraft. Indeed, when we consider that Winthrop, the Revolutionaries, and Madison were preaching (literally in Winthrop's case) against such a man, seeking not just to "domesticate" him, as the vice-president does in his response to Geraldine Ferraro, but to civilize him, to see his essence as a human being not in his merely natural but in his civic self, we may want to conclude that Bush's voter is not present at all in early American political culture.

Viewed the other way around, if from some merely Natural Man you took away Winthrop's preoccupation with a close-knit community, the revolutionaries' Spirit of '76, or the remaining virtue that Madison allowed to the American common man, what you got was surely not Bush's voter. In the case of each of these earlier American
concerns about character, what remained when the defining characteristics of the citizen were wholly absent was something wild and uncontrollable, vicious in the extreme, worse (for Winthrop) than an animal; what you got was the turbulent mob of Federalist nightmares—not the rather tame (if corrupt) and predictable egoist portrayed by the vice-president. More than this, we have to see the vice-president's pronouncement, given its appearance in a political campaign aimed at renewing the legitimacy of the American political order, as a kind of reverse jeremiad—an endorsement (if not a celebration) of the least noble part of the American character, a contribution, indeed, to the very corruption of the American electorate he cites as promising his reelection.

II

George Bush's voter did not spring full blown from the head of George Bush. Governor James Rhodes, the immediate source, did not arrive at such a politically denatured conception of the American citizen on his own or spontaneously. That the "2,000 Republicans" cheered and the journalists yawned suggests something more fundamental. To repeat, in his remarks about the American voter and Dream George Bush voiced an assumption of the age, and not a point of view peculiar to himself or his party. In this essay I am not interested in George Bush's politics but in our politics; Bush's remarks are important not because they were uttered by George Herbert Walker Bush but because his view of what is ultimately "real" in our politics is so widely shared. That he was also the vice-president and hence unavoidably speaking with the authority of his office is perhaps significant if we think about the effect of his remarks on his listeners. The point here, however, is only that Mr. Bush is plausibly an American representative of his time.

He at any rate seems to express our sense of reality. In a famous chapter of Democracy in America, Tocqueville observes that the Americans of Jacksonian America had unconsciously adopted the "philosophical approach" of Descartes, unconsciously, that is, because they had never read Descartes. Spurning books and systems, deferring to no aristocracy, Americans doubted everything but the "witness of their own eyes" and relied only on their "individual effort and judgment" as the source of certain knowledge. If Tocqueville were to examine Americans of today, and in particular George Bush's remark about the only thing that counts in an election, he
might well conclude that his favorite democrats had exchanged Descartes for Jeremy Bentham as their philosophical guide. When we want to talk about what human beings are really like, we intuitively abstract them, as Bentham did, from any and all social contexts; and when we want to report our conclusions about human nature, we unswervingly declare "man" to be nothing more nor less than Bentham's utility maximizer. No broad experience of actual human beings is necessary to produce this conviction. Anyone doubting this need only engage beginning college students in an open-ended discussion of "human nature." Innocent of history (as was Bentham), to say nothing of anthropology, they "know" that "man" naturally seeks to maximize his pleasures and minimize his pains and generally to "better his condition," and they know this before they take the introductory course in economics or behavioral psychology.

Bush's voter, let us be clear, is just such a Benthamite abstraction. As presented he is a pure type, not a part, dimension, or aspect of a larger, more complex human person; he is purely, simply, radically devoid of the usual range of characteristics that suggest the whole person—a "realistic" fiction with most of the reality left out. In particular, he is wholly unaffected by that wide range of cultural learnings political scientists sometimes call political socialization. Indeed, those complex and subtle understandings, often all jumbled together, that somehow tell us what it means to be a good person, a good American, and a good citizen, form no part of his conception of himself. This suggests that if we are to understand this socially unconstituted voter we have to see him, strictly speaking, as "non-American," as existing essentially outside of American history but also, in a sense, as "un-American"—surely in conflict with the traditions and culture that inform and sustain our political life.

For all that, he is familiar. We recognize him not because we've met him in earlier incarnations in American political culture, though individuals approximating the model have surely existed, nor because he is so plausibly "seen" in today's politics, nor because we think our experience confirms his presence as we observe Ed Meese, Michael Deaver, Pentagon weapons procurers, Ivan Boesky, HUD bureaucrats, S&L criminals, or some yuppie we particularly dislike. He is so familiar to us, so unnewsworthy, because he is the centerpiece of a well-known theory of human nature in the modern Western world we Americans seem especially to prize. Not just a figment of George Bush's imagination and no mere creature of media cynicism, he is none other than the archetypal Enlightenment Individual, and a thoroughly modernized one at that. He is the Eco-
omic Man of Econ. 1A, who more recently has taken on new life as the self-interested voter in so-called public or rational-choice theory. The vice-president’s tough-minded, unsentimental, bottom-line “realism,” then, is a reification of an ahistorical, merely hypothetical, intuitively perceived, theoretical construct.

We next have to ask how it is that in a presidential campaign speech, appealing to such an unreal theorist’s fantasy, to such a textbook abstraction, has come to be regarded as not merely the last word in realism but as something of a cliche. How has it happened that one of the most extravagant and radical flights of the theoretical imagination in Western political theory has come to be regarded as obvious (if disquieting) common sense—an operative bit of American political folklore?

III

A revived interest in the 1980s in free-market ideology is no doubt the immediate source of this unreal realism. Virtually silenced by nearly two generations of a dominant welfare-state liberalism, American liberalism’s “conservative” variant could once again wax theoretical under Ronald Reagan—and could again seek to create a real world to correspond to its putatively eternal, if hypothetical and abstract, verities. When the “bottom line” has become a metaphor for what Marxists used to call the “last analysis,” it is perhaps not surprising that the irreducible truth about politics should be expressed with the double-lined certitude of the accountant.

The laissez-faire renaissance notwithstanding, there is nothing specifically or distinctively conservative (or even Republican) about Bush’s voter. On the contrary, the politics appropriate to such a figure—a “politics” focused exclusively on what’s-in-it-for-me-and-my-family—derives, ultimately, I want to argue, from the tradition of American reform, from sources in our history and culture usually thought to be on the left. If this unlovely conception of the citizen seems to flow so obviously from an antigovernment, public-betrayed, contemporary conservatism, it may be only that one of the functions of liberals on the American right is to preserve some of the more unattractive innovations of liberals on the American left. America is “conservative,” Gunnar Myrdal once noted, but “the principles conserved are liberal, and some, indeed, are radical.”

Far from being a product of American conservatism, the corruption represented by Bush’s voter is exactly what Herbert Hoover used
to denounce Franklin Roosevelt and the New Deal for trying to produce in the American people. What else was the welfare state, for Hoover, but the wholesale buying of votes, to the destruction of the freedom, independence, and moral fiber of the American people? We may begin by seeing that George Bush, insofar as he represents contemporary "conservatism," has been schooled by FDR, and in reducing the public-spirited citizen to the purely self-regarding voter, Bush is merely expressing a latter-day version of New Deal realism.

At least up to a point. In speaking of the pocketbook we may say that Mr. Bush went not perhaps to the heart but surely to the real core of the political vision, inaugurated by the New Deal, that has dominated American politics since 1932. It is in no way to detract from the idealism and commitment to social justice that made the New Deal such a force in American politics to point out that it was launched from a very material foundation. Indeed, nearly twenty years before Franklin Roosevelt in his Second Inaugural Address saw "one-third of a nation ill-housed, ill-clad, ill-nourished" and promised to do something about it, Herbert Croly, the intellectual architect (if it had one) of the New Deal, had described the American common man's material expectations in terms that made something like the New Deal, given the Great Depression, a virtual necessity.

All Americans, according to Croly, the God-centered Puritans no less than the immigrants of his own day, came to these shores at least in part to better their material lot in life. "With all their professions of Christianity," Croly wrote of his countrymen, "their national idea remains thoroughly worldly. . . . The promise, which bulks so large in their patriotic outlook, is a promise of comfort and prosperity for an ever increasing majority of good Americans." So important had the quest for material well being become to Americans, he noted, that the expectation of it was regarded as a kind of national birthright and a test of political legitimacy itself:

The success of this democratic political system was indissolubly associated in the American mind with the persistence of abundant and widely distributed economic prosperity. Our democratic institutions became in a sense the guarantee that prosperity would continue to be abundant and accessible. In case the majority of good Americans were not prosperous, there would be grave reasons for suspecting that our institutions were not doing their duty.
In describing the voter and the American Dream as he does, George Bush can plausibly be seen as in the New Deal tradition.

Consider, too, Bush's view of the presidency. "Our democratic institutions," to which Croly referred, preeminenty included that office as a consequence of the Roosevelt Revolution. Reflecting on the New Deal in the 1950s, Clinton Rossiter could announce that the presidency had evolved in such a way as to provide informal acknowledgment of Croly's vision of the link between popular material aspirations and democratic political institutions. Not only did the post-New Deal president continue to be the "voice of the people," as he had been since Andrew Jackson, he was now also the "manager of prosperity." It should thus occasion no surprise that in 1984 a president who put money in the voters' wallets is seen as doing his duty and is duly reelected.

The self-regarding voter and largely material American Dream are thus the recognizable if not wholly legitimate offspring of that convenient marriage of Hamiltonian means (a powerful national government) and Jeffersonian ends (popular material well-being) sanctified by Croly's Promise of American Life.

Yet they also stand as eloquent criticisms of the failure of the New Deal to go beyond the admittedly pressing material needs of the American people to the nurturing of the civic self. It is hard to escape the conclusion, for example, that the "interest group liberalism" stemming from the New Deal, to use Theodore Lowi's term, failed to link popular material aspirations with what Croly also had said was a constant of American political history and culture. Croly had of course been quick to add that material well-being was only half the promise of American life; the land of economic prosperity was also the land of individual freedom and of a personal dignity that could come only from social equality. "America" stood for a way of life that also meant both individual and social improvement:

The amelioration promised to aliens and to future Americans was to possess its moral and social aspects. The implication was, and still is, that by virtue of the more comfortable and less trammeled lives which Americans were enabled to lead, they would constitute a better society and would become in general a worthier set of men.

And it was for the sake of transforming this promise into a "constructive national purpose" that Croly set forth a theory that would reconcile the American democrat, hitherto "self-reliant, undisci-
plined, suspicious of authority, equalitarian, and individualistic,”
exhibiting a “mixture of optimism, fatalism, and conservatism” and overwhelmingly local in his practical attachments if not his patriotic sentiments, with a “national political organization”—that is, with active, positive government. We may not wish to lament the failure of Croly’s own technocratic vision to receive full institutional expression in the remainder of the twentieth century, but the point is that, contrary to Croly’s hopes for a “worthier set of men,” however defined, the development of the American political system was somehow arrested at a rather primitive and material level. A “better” society? We at any rate became a richer one, and, as Croly’s sense of irony might have led him to remark, sufficient unto the day was the prosperity thereof.

Indeed, it is hard to escape the conclusion that the New Deal failed to link popular material aspirations with a “constructive social ideal” pursued by a “national organization” and guided by a “noble national purpose,” Croly’s or anyone else’s. It is even harder to believe that the New Deal bequeathed to George Bush a conception of the civic self in any essential consistent with what citizenship meant to the founding generation. But on that subject Croly himself, theorist of the New Deal, was revealingly silent.

It is true that the zeal, dedication, and passion for social justice expressed by and through FDR’s Democratic party was not reducible to a bread-and-butter prosperity or to the homeliness of Bush’s American Dream. It may also be true, however, that the actual arrival of national prosperity after World War II served to obscure the extent to which a thinly disguised majoritarian selfishness had become tacitly established as a surrogate public philosophy. What if, say, only one-tenth of the nation continues in one way or other to be wretched and the remainder are pretty well off and reasonably content? A Democratic party slogan of 1968—“If you want to continue to live like a Republican, vote Democratic”—gets us part of the way to Bush’s voter. A remark at the Republican National Convention in 1972—“The majority of the American people are unyoung, unblack, and unpoor”—takes us the rest of the way.

IV

Yet the ultimate source of this view of the satisfied citizen and of a diminished American Dream, as George Bush’s reference to the “special interests” makes us see, is not the New Deal but Croly’s own
Progressive era—the New Deal being practically an ad hoc or pragmatic extension of Progressivism. Under the gun because of the Great Depression, the New Deal never got around to addressing any but the most pressing and obvious problems and may well have instilled in the American popular consciousness the notion that politics and government were for serving your own or your group’s economic interest and for nothing else. If so, the New Deal was but acting out a script prepared by the previous generation of theorists and reformers.

It was not merely that the economic crisis made an essentially material American Dream seem good enough under the circumstances and civic virtue in the citizen a luxury. More than this, the understanding of reality generated by the Progressives made any alternative appear as it has ever since, idealistic, naive, out of touch with the facts of life, even threateningly moralistic. For the New Deal to have done much besides attend to the economic crisis, it would have been required not only to transcend itself but also to repudiate some of the most fundamental assumptions of Progressivism.

V

Science, plus technology, plus industry, was surely much of what “progress” meant to the Progressive era. It would be hard to exaggerate the faith in science and expertise that inspired those legions of zealous reformers. A more promising faith for the new century confronting them, science had in principle replaced religion for growing numbers of Americans, certainly those in enlightened leadership circles, as the basis of their world view. And knowledge (science) was power, as Francis Bacon had insisted, power through technology and industry for producing just that material prosperity Croly cited as the sine qua non of American political legitimacy. Moreover, the industrial transformation of America also meant national power, internally as the rapid growth of bureaucracy called forth by the regulatory movement brought about a centralization of both political and administrative power and externally as the United States was well on its way to becoming the most powerful, as well as the richest, nation on earth.

Although such progress had indeed transformed American society and economy almost beyond recognition during the half century after the Civil War, the reformers themselves, Mr. Dooley observed,
were not making a revolution but only “beating a carpet,” attempting to purge what they thought to be an essentially sound system of adventitious corrupting elements, the works, in their view, of evil and designing men.

What Mr. Dooley could not see, what the reformers themselves (Croly possibly excepted) were unable to see, was that they were contributing willy-nilly to the consolidation of the Hamiltonian national State system. The Framers of the Constitution, we should not forget, sought to create not only a more perfect union but, as the Anti-Federalists quickly saw, a more powerful national government, a system of government of potentially great power indeed.

It was Alexander Hamilton who foresaw an industrial America (as opposed to Jefferson’s agrarian ideal) and who saw Americans more as factory workers than as independent citizens. It was Hamilton who sought to wed the interests of well-to-do manufacturers to the new national government, who urged the neutralization of state and local political power, who advocated (successfully) that the national government have direct power over individual citizens, who championed a strong presidency over a factionalized congress, and who argued (again, successfully) for a national government (and especially the judiciary) generally removed as far as possible from popular control. Though it was no doubt hard for American capitalists to see the Progressives and later the New Dealers as their benefactors, both eras of reform, while helping generally to realize Hamilton’s vision perhaps most importantly served to rationalize and stabilize a “political economy” that otherwise threatened to self-destruct.

The Progressive reformers nevertheless took their carpet beating seriously because they were altogether uncritical believers (very American ones) in the idea of progress. Where the European theorists of the generic idea of progress looked back on the past as a record of darkness, superstition, and oppression, the American Progressives for the most part saw the exact opposite. As Croly wryly noted, his fellow Progressives were inclined to be “protestants,” meaning that they cherished a vision of the American political system functionally similar to Luther’s conception of the primitive Church. This suggested that “reform” was really a kind of Reformation, a re-forming of the present corrupt system in light of the purity of the original plan of the Framers—a restoration, indeed a “revival.” Those great statesmen had discovered for all time Nature’s plan for the perfect form of government, which an inattentive citizenry, alas, had allowed to fall under the control of the Unscrupulous. There was thus nothing fundamentally wrong with the Ameri-
can political system; it had simply been corrupted by bad men—the urban bosses, the unprincipled “plutocrats,” dishonest politicians in both parties, and the like. Eliminate these corrupting elements by means of the appropriate reforms, and all would be well—that is, would be as the Founding Fathers intended.

Not only was the American past a good and glorious one, it was also uniquely American; though in accord with the dictates of Nature itself, the American political order was also the peculiar possession of the American people. The reformers never doubted Lincoln’s belief that if democracy failed in America, it would “perish from this earth.” America was truly the last best hope of mankind.

For all the “worldliness” of the American promise, we cannot begin to understand the Progressives or their legacy unless we see that they defined the past, the way of life they thought they remembered and wanted to restore, almost exclusively in terms that are unmistakably political. Specifically, viewing the work of the Framers through lenses tinted by Jacksonianism, Progressive Americans saw the struggle against the bosses and the trusts as a struggle for a revived “democracy.” If Lincoln had said the Civil War was “somehow caused” by slavery, he was quite certain that the ultimate issue was whether there would survive the “government of the people, by the people, and for the people” that “our fathers” had “brought forth on this continent.” With Lincoln’s triad of democratic phrases ringing in their ears—the platforms of all three parties in 1912, Republican, Democratic, and Progressive, quoted Lincoln—the Progressives had a political battle cry that embraced the whole of the American way of life, and its name was democracy.

A way of life so conceived, democracy so dedicated, was in deep trouble as it confronted the realities of the new age dawning. The old way of life, the life of rural and small town America, of a rough social equality, of wide open economic opportunity, of small-scale participatory politics, of the vague and shifting boundaries between politics, morality, economic pursuits, and religion—this democracy, as Tocqueville himself foresaw in his warnings about an “aristocracy of manufacturers,” was quite incompatible with the inevitable concentrations of economic, social, and political power of the new industrial society and bureaucratic state. In short, the Hamiltonian system emerging, both cause and effect of progress, was the virtual negation of the past the Progressive crusaders thought they wanted to restore.

The old way of life itself, as Marx and William Graham Sumner in their different ways pointed out, would change quickly enough,
as "capitalism" (Marx) or "the industrial organization" (Sumner) transformed the most basic conditions of life and created a world after its own image. "Democracy," however, the complex range of meanings and associations that had defined and legitimated the old way of life, was a more serious problem. The received or traditional meaning of the national creed had become an embarrassment. The new system wanted obedient workers, consumers, and taxpayers, and, when necessary, soldiers; it would have a hard time coping with the traditional American democrat—"self-reliant, undisciplined, suspicious of authority, equalitarian, and individualistic," as Croly described him, which was a good enough picture of the Jacksonian participating citizen. Plainly, "democracy" too had to be transformed, and this the Progressives would achieve without quite knowing what they had done.

As a force for the modernization of American life, as a largely unwitting instrument of consolidated, centralized, national power in a bureaucratic, technological age, the Progressive movement, Janus-faced between past and future, had to discredit an old way of life before it could create a new one. And since that old American way of life had been described—indeed defined—almost exclusively in political terms, as a republican and democratic as well as a natural and a moral order, the Progressive movement, before it was finished, had effectively undermined where it had not outright destroyed the specifically political legacy of the American past. In particular, the Progressives in effect depoliticized the concept of the good American as they thought about and worked toward the new society, believing all the while that they were only restoring "government of the people, by the people, and for the people" to its rightful place in the American scheme of things. Here a distinction is in order. Although the crusading reformers thus unintentionally contributed to this transformation of democracy and the citizen, it was mainly the work of ostensibly detached intellectuals—and in particular of the newly professionalized social scientists, who quickly assumed a kind of oracular status in American life.

Were trusts and other new forms of organization and concentrated power a violation of the old egalitarian competitive and moral order? No doubt, but there was another way to look at it: With the new and unsentimental economics able to explain "economies of scale," all but the most fervent trust busters were forced to agree that concentration of economic power, bigness per se, was not only not necessarily bad but was in fact part of the very (Hamiltonian) means by which the (Jeffersonian) material aspirations of the
American common man were to be realized. Yet there was both more and less in the old republicanism of Jefferson (even granting his "hedonism") than "making it"—less because republican strictures against "luxury" precluded a quest for mere wealth and power and more because Jefferson's republicanism required that citizens be "participators" in their own government, that they be public persons. Unfortunately, a corporate economy and a fragmented polity made that part of old republicanism, now "democracy," increasingly problematic.

What to do with "democracy" as a political way of life? Could there be an understanding of what it meant to a good American that avoided the political altogether? "A democracy is more than a form of government," John Dewey had said; "it is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience." Ultimately it would be seen as no form of government at all and not much in the way of "associated living" either, as the Progressives came to encourage a view of the "citizen" as "the individual," with "making it" the chief concern. The concept of "democratic capitalism," developed later in the century as a stratagem in corporate public relations, reinforced the point that democracy and hence Americanism was somehow a function of economics. Yet it was the Progressives themselves who had paved the way for this reductionism—for the easy identification of a classic form of government, a "constitution" requiring a common involvement in a politically defined way of life, with an economic system based on individual, material self-interest.

The Progressive theorists propounded a new idea of politics and ultimately of citizenship, in which neither democracy nor republicanism as Americans had understood them made any sense. They did this, moreover, in the time-honored American way, in the guise of an attack on theory and ideas as such. Pragmatism in general and the newly self-conscious discipline of political science in particular, both contributors to what Bernard Crick called the "cult of realism in the Progressive era," set about quietly to divorce democratic politics from any notion of a common good and citizenship itself from any conception of an integrated life. When the new realists were finished, politics could never again be identified with the good, either of the person or of society, and especially not of that quaint relic, the State. In this campaign, it must be said, the practical (and zealous) reformers themselves were unwitting accomplices.

In the first place, the crusaders in the movement approached the task of political reform deeply alienated from both the politics and
the government of their day. Government for the most part they deemed properly to be the province of experts, and the age seemed determined to transform all political questions into administrative ones. As for politics, the reformers’ many devices for direct democracy bespoke a conviction that parties, legislatures, and courtrooms were irrevocably corrupt—certainly not fit instruments for genuine popular rule. Inevitably, it would seem, “politics” and “political,” virtual synonyms for dishonesty, incompetence, and worse, became dissociated in the minds of reformers with the virtue traditionally attaching to the activity appropriate to the citizen. “Politics” and “political” became objects of distaste and moral revulsion. Hence the reputation of the reformers for self-righteousness and of their public action as a crusade.

When the passion for reform subsided, such a politics of redemption and reformation would collapse of its own unfulfilled hopes and expectations—with more than a little help, however, from its ostensible friends, the scientific realists. Serving as the midwife of disillusionment, the new science of politics attacked directly the core of (crusading) Progressive democratic beliefs about good citizenship. Did the reformers exalt civic-mindedness; careful, detached, objective attention to the “issues”; the sacrifice of time, energy, and personal resources for the public good—and this on an increasing number of complex and arcane matters that vexed even the experts? Voting studies could easily show that this “rationalist image of the common man” (Carl Friedrich’s term) was largely a “myth.” Were the crusaders appalled at the rank selfishness and dirty dealing of the “special interests,” whose machinations were a blight on the land and a standing violation of the common good? The “group interpretation of politics” provided by Arthur F. Bentley argued that such group behavior was merely what the political game was all about, that it was unscientific to judge the motives of the groups, and that in any case the “common good” was another of those “myths” with no basis in the observable behavior of groups. Did the reformers talk reverently of the “sovereign” people, and of the “will” of the people? They did so just as the growing economic, social, and ethnic diversity of American society made the notion of a unified popular will wildly at odds with the facts. Democratic citizenship on that model thus was rendered “unrealistic” and those who continued to believe in it naive.

Nor was this all. As the crusaders’ conception of the citizen drew heavily on a century of conviction about democracy and the common man, the scientific critique of Populist and then Progressive
political revivalism necessarily went further than its ostensible target. There was in fact no room for the old democratic citizen, or for republican virtue, or for the common good, or for a sovereign people (however conceived), in Bentley's scheme of things. In the old order the good citizen, the good American, and the good man or woman had formed a continuum, a unity, a kind of gestalt; in Bentley's political science, however, concerned as it was to be scientific and to accept as real only the observable and the measurable, there were only "roles" and groups of various kinds and nothing more. A realist, scientific political science was simply uninterested in what would later be dismissed as "normative" concepts, concepts derived from an older political science and from a traditional American public philosophy now derided by Bentley as "soul-stuff." As Charles A. Beard put it, to be scientific meant you had to separate the study of politics from "theology, ethics, and patriotism," which together could be taken as summing up traditional American beliefs. And like Marx (or at any rate Engels), Bentley also relegated the "state" to his own museum of antiquities, perhaps alongside "the individual," who for Bentley was real only as a member of a group. "When the groups are adequately stated, everything is stated," Bentley claimed. "When I say everything I mean everything. The complete description is the complete science."

Between the moralistic crusaders who thought of the citizen in such rarified and demanding terms as virtually to guarantee disillusionment and the amoral political scientists who appeared simply to define the citizen out of existence, there would seem to be little left of the traditional American democrat. Yet it was not enough that the democrat's self-understanding as a participating citizen be exposed as a myth—a lesson that would be reinforced over and over as the complexities of the new society made politics increasingly bewildering and the efficacy of the typical citizen more and more in doubt. It was also necessary that the myths of the past be exploded as well. A movement serious about progress—that believed with John Dewey in the "continuous reconstruction of experience"—could not allow the past to remain unreconstructed. Not only was civic virtue seen to be a myth in the twentieth century, it was also important to show that it had never been real.

This task fell on the capable head of Charles A. Beard, a realist political scientist who was arguably this century's most influential American historian as well. Just as Bentley's political science did not permit distinguishing one group from another in respect to their virtue in serving the common good, so Beard's "flat" history showed
that the past in this same respect was in no way superior to or even different from the present. His conclusion, traumatic to the patriotic Americans of his day, was that an unsentimental view of the Founding Fathers revealed their feet to be made of some very familiar clay.

The central thesis of Beard's best known and most influential book, *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution of the United States* (1913), was that the Constitution as it emerged from the convention was essentially an economic and a conservative document, with its political meaning a reflection of the economic interests of those who had framed it. This meant that the Founding Fathers were not disinterested patriots, "working merely under the guidance of abstract principles of political science," but rather, like the politicians of his own day, representatives of "distinct groups whose economic interests they understood and felt in concrete, definite forms through their own personal experience with identical property rights." What is more, since they saw the main threat to their property rights to be the politically volatile common man, the Framers were seen to be fearful of the radical masses, contemptuous of popular judgment, opposed to majority rule—in a word, antidemocratic. In fine, there was a clear link, Beard argued, between the Framers' antidemocratic views, the structure of the Constitution, and their desire to protect their own economic interests.

Academic critics have not dealt gently with Beard's book. Beard's method was seriously faulty, it was said, and he had some of his facts wrong. According to Gordon Wood, it has been "torn to shreds." Much of the criticism, however, seemed to say only that Beard had exaggerated, had only overstated his case; it thus had the no doubt unintended effect of confirming the heart of Beard's thesis: "The Constitution was not just an economic document. . . . We would be doing a grave injustice to the political sagacity of the Founding Fathers if we assumed that property or personal gain was their only motive. . . . If the members of the Convention were directly interested in the outcome of their work and expected to derive benefits from the establishment of the new system, so also did most of the people of the country. . . . Since most of the people were middle-class and had private property, practically everybody was interested in the protection of property." Beard had thus failed to see, the critics alleged, that the Founding Fathers were speaking for Americans generally, not just themselves. "A constitution which did not protect property would have been rejected without any question, for the *American people* had fought the Revolution for the preservation of
life, liberty, and property." "That personal economic interests were involved is undeniable. Yet the principles they carried with them to Philadelphia would not all have fitted in their pocketbooks."  

Yet if some of those principles were carried to the convention in their pocketbooks, that was good enough in a "realistic" age to establish the "self-interest" of the Framers and, if one were so disposed in an age that was also moralistic, to see such self-interest as tainting their entire enterprise. "To a generation of materialists," wrote Henry Steele Commager, Beard's economic interpretation made clear that the stuff of history was material. To a generation disillusioned by the exploitation and ruthlessness of big business, it discovered that the past, too, had been ravaged by exploitation and greed. To a generation that looked with fishy eyes on the claims of Wilsonian idealism and all but rejoiced in their frustration, it suggested that each generation had made similar claims and that all earlier idealisms had been similarly flawed by selfishness and hypocrisy.  

Whatever the merits of Beard's analysis, and there was both more and less in Beard's scholarship than his devoted followers and his critics allowed, his characterization of the Framers was the coup de grace for the traditional conception of the American citizen.  

For the citizen? To the contrary, was not Beard's book a critique of the Founding Fathers? And beyond that was it not a covert attack on the entrenched business interests of his day, who had shown themselves to be adept at using the Madisonian Constitution to frustrate citizen-led movements for reform? Had not Beard himself (anachronistically) described the politics of the constitutional era as a struggle between "populism and business"? As a Progressive and a radical, was not Beard against the entrenched conservatives, past and present, and for the popular forces for progress?  

True enough. What Beard did, however, was tacitly to deny the possibility of civic or republican virtue as such. If even those fabled American heroes, presented to over a century of American school children as exemplars of all the virtues of the citizen, turned out to be such ordinary human beings, what was the point of trying to be anything other than your natural self? The key here, perhaps, is Commager's word "hypocrisy." A. Lawrence Lowell was speaking very much in what was widely assumed to be the spirit of the Founders when he said that the "great statesman" was a kind of moral tutor to the people, appealing always to "higher emotions, to principle, to
self-restraint, not to selfishness and appetite." Now, after Beard’s realist exposé, it was evident for everyone to see that all the fine talk about principles and self-restraint served only to divert attention from the Founders’ own selfish preoccupation with their appetites.

What would have most grieved the Framers of the Constitution, of course, was the attack on their republican virtue implied in the charge that their motives were essentially economic. To the men of Philadelphia this would have signified corruption—the triumph of their private interests over the common good. The unkindest cut of all is that they came out looking very much like one of Madison’s factions, “actuated by some common impulse of passion, or of interest, adverse to the rights of other citizens, or to the permanent and aggregate interests of the community.” In the language of the Progressive era, which is still our language today, Beard had in effect accused the Founding Fathers of being a “special interest.”

Some moral tutors they turned out to be! Had the Founding Fathers been honest and realistic, the Progressives have encouraged us to believe, they would have acknowledged frankly and openly that they, like everyone else, were intent on using the res publica for their own private and economic advantage. Had they told it like it is, we should suppose, had they been self-aware and up-front about their motives, it might have been unnecessary for Harold Lasswell, that eloquent voice of Progressive realism, to tell us that politics is really only a matter of who gets what, when, and how.

Commager assures us that neither Beard nor his close disciples took “malign satisfaction” in seeing the grand plans of the past revealed as flawed or in seeing “history divested of its heroes, and heroes of their halos.” Contrary to his own prescription about what it meant to be scientific, Beard himself was animated in his work, according to Commager, by “patriotism” as well as a “passionate concern” for the truth. “But in those who knew him only through his writings, he encouraged an attitude of iconoclasm and, often, of cynicism.”

VI

The difference between Progressive realism and cynicism was at best never easy to see. As the Progressive wisdom has filtered down to our own time, transmitted by legions of teachers, journalists, politicians, novelists, filmmakers, and other shapers of our consciousness, few of
whom may ever have heard of Beard or Bentley, much less read their books, we may have lost sight of the difference altogether.

This, it seems to me, is how, finally, we are to understand George Bush's voter—as the apotheosis of this historically transmitted synthesis of realism and cynicism. This commonplace and nonexistent political animal is the Progressive Anti-Myth become the Established Myth of our own time, appearing today as Benthamism sui generis transmuted into a politically empty American Dream. A "synthetic-a priori" truth, as philosophers say, neo-Progressive political realism holds that it is both human nature and very American—the way it really is and should be with us—that all men and women, in this case voters, serve only themselves (and their families). It is merely the American Dream the Framers of the Constitution really had in mind all along as they laid the foundation for our system of "democratic capitalism," though because of a lot of false consciousness about republicanism they never quite got around to saying so.

After nearly three quarters of a century of being told that the virtues of the traditional citizen are idealistic, moralistic, and the outlook of the self-righteous do-gooder, or worse, illiberal, anti-individualist, or even socialist, we may have landed through "progress" at a point where the current mood makes it possible, even necessary, to regard what was once a priceless possession as empty of any real meaning, as entailing no obligations and promising no political identity—a "citizen" of very easy virtue indeed. What is left of the Progressive crusade on this side of progress has become a holding operation, a kind of neo-Progressive conservatism rooted in the culturally defined "realities" of human nature, whose only political goal is to continue to protect the people against the special interests. Yet everything is now upside down. In his way Bush was making the same assessment of the American voter that Beard made of the Founding Fathers. He was describing a corrupt citizen and a thoroughly corrupt one at that. If the Framers were not statesmen disinterestedly prescribing for the common good, so the average American is not a citizen but only a self-interested voter, using the political system (in this case the presidency), as the Founding Fathers did the Constitution, for private economic benefit.

Unlike Beard, however, Bush is plainly not critical of the object of his analysis, and not only because it would be imprudent to say uncomplimentary things about the people while soliciting their support. The more important reason is that the language of Progressive democracy, which is still our language today, lacks the vocabulary for criticizing the people or even for perceiving flaws in them. For
the Progressive-as-crusader "the people" could do no wrong; they were the general or public interest against which "special" interests were defined. For the Progressive-as-realist, the scientific analyst of group behavior, there were in the first place no good or bad guys and also no public interest. In both cases there was only power, only the majority—and progress: an endlessly expanding economy and an inexhaustible cornucopia of material blessings, which in the long run made it unnecessary to worry much about who got what, when, or how, or about civic virtue. When progress, "realistically" understood, precludes talk about Croly's "worthier set of men" and concentrates our attention solely on material well-being, the less said about civic virtue the better. This has made it possible for later generations of liberals to think of public policy and the polity itself as having no bearing at all on who we are or what kind of human beings we might become, indeed as morally neutral.\textsuperscript{38}

In fact, only in old republican terms can the people be corrupt. To say nothing of the Anti-Federalists, even Madison would not hesitate to see in Bush's "people" merely a majority faction, a mass of voters lacking any concern for the common good, interested only in their own advantage. They would be a quiescent majority faction, satisfied, even complacent, to be sure, and thus would fail to pose the kind of political threat Madison feared from the turbulent common man, but they would be a faction nonetheless. And Tocqueville would see in the teeming millions of individuals constituting Bush's polity, all dreaming their own dreams but all dreaming the same dream, precisely the ingredients of the majority tyranny he feared.\textsuperscript{59}

This accounts in Bush's response to Ferraro for the sort of inverted Progressivism of his attack on the "special interests," those clamorous and easily identifiable groups who have diverted government to their own advantage and against whom the majority of the American people had to be defended by the power of a putatively neutral national administration. To the original Progressives, of course, the "special interests" were the railroads, the oil companies—trusts of every kind: violators all of the American promise, destroyers of competition, stiflers of opportunity, guarantors of inequality, corruptors of politicians. But the "special interests" of our times are very different kinds of groups. They are the groups for whom "progress" remains a chimera—blacks and other minorities, the poor, women, or more broadly, all those unorganized folk lacking wealth, power, and access in a system that will work only on those terms. They are the residual beneficiaries of the lengthening policy and institutional shadow of the New Deal. Unlike "the people" in 1914 or 1984, such
groups will never be a majority. Their fate lies with a majority con­ceived by the wisdom now conventional as purely and simply self-interested, and for that reason, when flattered, incipiently tyranni­cal.

In the end it is an odd kind of realism that overlooks the wisdom of an imposing line of thinkers with their own reputation for realism who have held that political institutions, including constitutions, must be anchored in the interests, affections, beliefs, and character of the people they govern. Aristotle, Machiavelli, Montesquieu, Rousseau, Burke, Hume, Paine, and Tocqueville, as well as our own Founding Fathers, all argued this point, and all would have declared a society based on the likes of Bush's voter to be impossible.

Contrary to our instincts conditioned by Progressive political real­ism, candidate Bush, as spokesman for the dominant assumption of our times, is wrong about the American voter and not simply in the obvious sense that typical voters in fact are likely to weigh other factors besides their pocketbooks as they decide how to cast their votes. He is wrong in the more important sense that the entire way of understanding our political life represented by such realism is fundamentally mistaken, and worse, dangerous. No political order could work, our own, perhaps, least of all, if it were composed entirely of the kind of citizen his assessment presupposes. A constitutional dem­ocracy committed both to political unity and to social and cultural diversity, yet whose vision is limited to private dreams, is arguably on its way to self-destruction.

The real significance of Mr. Bush's remarks is not that he is talk­ing (mistakenly) about real voters but to them. It makes a difference how we understand ourselves as a people and as a society, and the way in which we talk to each other about what we basically are will inevitably have consequences. Such prophesies as are generated by our "realism" can be self-fulfilling in ways that are as disastrous as they are real.

NOTES

3. Ibid.
"misguided judgment" that society can take care of itself) might degenerate into "egoism" or selfishness (a natural "perversity of the heart") may be said to have been the problem of democracy for Tocqueville, and the Democracy in America as a whole was an attempt to assay the resources American democracy had to counteract it and thus prevent the rise of a peculiarly democratic form of despotism. One must doubt that Tocqueville himself could have imagined a clearer illustration of the interplay between egoism and individualism than is provided by Bush's voter and conception of the American Dream.

6. Moreover, political opponents of George Bush also must see that it would be inaccurate as well as unjust to suggest that "realism" (as treated here) is all there is to George Bush's outlook. On the contrary, as Michael Novak reminds me, Bush's own life can be seen as an exemplification of just those old republican ideals of citizenship and public service that stand in such sharp contrast to his remarks about voters and the American Dream under examination here. Although in those remarks he articulates clearly what Robert Bellah and his associates call our "first language" of utilitarian individualism, that set of understandings of the human person we modern Americans customarily use to explain and justify our behavior, Bush's actual life is surely an embodiment of our "second language" of republican and biblical individualism, a very different set of understandings generated by Puritanism and early republicanism. See Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1985). It was exactly this second, earlier, language that President Bush used in his Inaugural Address, when he spoke of civic-mindedness, a spirit of "volunteerism," and neighborliness—terms that bespeak a political morality radically at odds with his "realism" of 1984. Alternatively, in the terms elaborated by H. Mark Roelofs, Bush of 1984 was speaking the language of "bourgeois ideology," a set of assumptions describing how self-interested individuals meet and treat one another; President Bush, on the other hand, was urging the American individualist to harken to the call of community and the spirit of sacrifice so much a part of "protestant myth." He is the same man, giving voice at different times to the two sides of what Roelofs calls our "schizophrenic" individualism. See Ideology and Myth in American Politics (Boston: Little, Brown, 1976), chap. 2. As these analyses indicate, it is seriously to misunderstand American political culture (not to mention George Bush himself) to ask which is the "real" George Bush. The answer, of course, is that both are, even if the Bush of 1984 saw fit to portray his compatriots in only one of these dimensions.

7. Self-interest explains a lot in politics, according to Jane J. Mansbridge, "but the claim that self-interest alone motivates political behavior must be either vacuous, if self-interest can encompass any motive, or false, if self-interest means behavior that consciously intends only self as the beneficiary." "The Rise and Fall of Self-Interest in the Explanation of Polit-


9. Ironically, candidate Ferraro’s “idealistic” and complex view that we Americans care about money but also about “each other,” considered as a statement capable of being proved or disproved, is in point of fact more realistic than the fashionably tough-minded and simple “realism” of George Bush. It would be easy to show, for example, that countless Americans routinely devote their time and other resources to civic causes on all levels of the American system and that they often explain their so doing by referring simply to a desire to help other people less fortunate than themselves or to a wish to make good things happen for their community. (George Bush’s own career, again, is a case in point.) Ferraro is on safe ground in pointing to the well-known charitable instincts of the American people. But what follows from this? It is by no means obvious that “compassion,” a prominent Democratic theme in 1984 that seemed to inspire Ferraro’s attack on Bush, is necessarily an emotion that citizens in a healthy democracy should feel for each other, especially when it is portrayed, as it was by Mario Cuomo at the convention, as a familial virtue, as a feeling members of the “family of America” should have for one another. Americans have a hard enough time in the closing years of the twentieth century being close to one another as citizens without asking them to love one another as brothers and sisters. Even Rousseau saw “compassion” as a natural virtue, which only natural men and women would be expected to feel equally and spontaneously toward their fellow creatures. What a “civilized” and necessarily institutionalized compassion would be like is by no means clear (Rousseau said our natural instincts would be superceded by “justice” in the civil state), and our understanding of the notion is not aided by invoking the metaphor of the family. Still, we Americans do care for one another, and it is realistic to say so. For Geraldine Ferraro to have achieved George Bush’s level of empirical unrealism, she would have had to say something like, “Of course, we Americans always help others before we help ourselves,” an assertion as transparently false as the claim that the only thing that matters in an election is the pocketbook.


11. Consider that Michael Dukakis, after quoting John Winthrop on community in his speech accepting his party’s nomination at the Democratic National Convention in 1988, ignored that theme thereafter in his campaign and dwelled instead on exactly George Bush’s American Dream of 1984.


13. In fact, a society composed wholly or even largely of such voters could conserve nothing—not institutions, not the traditions that give meaning to a nation’s politics, not society itself, not even, arguably, the
family Bush invoked to justify his voter's self-interest. We have only to add
the universal scramble for power and fear of violent death to this perfected
privatism in order to get Hobbes's state of nature, a prospect few conserva-
tives would find attractive. It is only the "conservatism" intrinsic to a thor-
oughly liberal society, a society that neither fears anarchy nor understands
the cultural conditions of social coherence and political viability, that can
calmly regard this kind of "pure" individual as existentially real.

14. Quoted in Louis Hartz, The Liberal Tradition in America (New
15. Herbert Croly, The Promise of American Life (1909; New York:
16. Ibid., p. 11.
17. Clinton Rossiter, The American Presidency (New York: Signet Key
Books, 1956), p. 25, cites the Employment Act of 1946 as providing the first
clear recognition of this informal or conventional, i.e., not constitutionally
prescribed, function of the president.
18. Theodore J. Lowi, The End of Liberalism: The Second Republic of
the United States, 2d ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1979), chap. 3.
20. Ibid., pp. 31, 35.
21. On the concept of a "political economy" in Hamilton's scheme of
things, see Sheldon Wolin, "State and Counter-Revolution," talk at De-
Pauw University (March 1983), and "Reagan Country," The New York Re-
23. See Sheldon S. Wolin, "From Progress to Modernization: The Con-
24. In seeming to portray the Progressives alternatively as crusaders and
scientific realists, I do not wish to suggest that particular figures in the
movement were necessarily or exclusively either one or the other. On the
contrary, as Crick's account suggests, the two tendencies in Progressivism I
distinguish with these labels were both more or less articles of faith to most
of the leading figures of the day. (See Bernard Crick, The American Sci-
ence of Politics [Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 1959], pp. 74, 124.)
John Dewey, who above all devoted himself to overcoming such "dualisms,"
who indeed defined "democracy" and "science" as complementary ways of
thinking and acting, is an obvious case in point. Dewey's attempted synthe-
sis notwithstanding, Progressive idealism and realism, I think we can now
see, were contradictory impulses with very different implications, both de-
structive, for a conception of democratic citizenship.
25. Jefferson is surely one of the main sources of American liberalism, as
David Greenstone argues, but his contribution to American democracy is
less clear. For all Jefferson's legendary trust in the political capacities of the
common man and despite his insistence that citizens be "participators in
the government of affairs," Jefferson's "pursuit of happiness" is notoriously


27. Although in what follows I concentrate on the new political science, it should be said that all the newly professionalized social sciences, as well as the (muckraking) journalism of the day, contributed to our present understanding that "reality" is always mundane and always at odds with what Lowell called the "higher emotions." In establishing this almost undisputed "insider's" wisdom, the discipline of economics was surely not less important than the new political science, as is suggested by the ease with which the purely self-interested voter is seen as the political counterpart of the "economic man" of textbook lore. "Possibly the worst single contribution of the economics profession to the understanding of political society," writes Robert Kuttner, "is the tautological and straitened attempt to reduce all public-spiritedness or altruism to merely an odd, masochistic special case of egoistic utility-maximization. As Steven Kelman has observed, an ethic of public service is vital to a democratic system of government. When everything is reduced to a private, profit-maximizing transaction, that ethic is diminished." "False Profit: The Perils of Privatization," *New Republic* 200 (6 February 1989): 23. For a wide-ranging critique of this tendency in American social science and especially in political science, see Mansbridge, ed., *Beyond Self-Interest*, cited above, n. 7.


29. Quoted, ibid., p. 118.


37. Ibid., p. 308.
37. See Michael J. Sandel, “Morality and the Liberal Ideal,” New Re­public 190 (7 May 1984): 15–17. With “liberal,” the dreaded “L” word, in­creasingly in disfavor as a label, we must note the irony in the alternative some erstwhile liberals have chosen to describe themselves and their pro­gram. It is, of course, “progressive.”
39. The importance of “caring for one another,” Tocqueville might have lectured Geraldine Ferraro and even more so George Bush, was not for the sake of “compassion” but to guarantee that American civil society would not become a collection of disconnected, isolated individuals, ripe for “ad­ministrative” despotism—that it would continue to provide barriers against majority tyranny and the kind of despotism, itself a product of “progress,” that democracies had most to fear. This requires not welfare programs (though it does not preclude them) but democratic political action and the sort of “good life” a rightly conceived democracy can nurture.
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