

Liberalism's Forgotten Founder

"Herbert Croly & Progressive Democracy" by Kevin C. O'Leary, in *Polity* (Summer 1994), Thompson Hall, Univ. of Massachusetts, Box 7520, Amherst, Mass. 01003-7520.

In his influential 1909 book, *The Promise of American Life*, Herbert Croly (1869-1930) argued that in urban, industrialized, 20th-century America, a strong national government was needed to counter the nation's emerging large corporations and to improve the welfare of the average citizen. Hamiltonian government, he urged, should be used for Jeffersonian ends. His argument provided

much of the intellectual foundation for Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal. While Croly's state-building program has been carried out, writes O'Leary, a political scientist at Claremont McKenna College, the rest of his reform agenda has been forgotten.

In Croly's view, spelled out in *Promise* and in *Progressive Democracy* (1914), it is America's unique purpose to make the democratic ideal a full-fledged reality. Unlike other nations with liberal democratic institutions, America had no feudal past to overcome, and its national identity was forged more out of common ideas than out of a shared past. Realizing the democratic ideal—in which liberty is balanced by equality, and the people have a sense

Reinventing the Budget

"Genuinely new ideas in public management don't come along that often," observes Alan Ehrenhalt, executive editor of *Governing* (Nov. 1994). To make up for this deficiency, old ideas keep getting renamed.

More than 50 years ago, the Nobel-laureate-to-be Herbert Simon began promulgating the eminently sensible idea that instead of just spending money because they have it, governments should decide what they want to accomplish and then keep track of whether their expenditures are helping them accomplish it. In 1949, at the federal level, the Hoover Commission recommended almost exactly the same thing, and called it "performance budgeting."

But unknown to the Hoover Commission, the history of this particular name game was only beginning. Performance budgeting returned in the Defense Department in the 1960s as "planning-programming-budgeting systems" (PPBS); in the Carter White House in the 1970s as "zero-based budgeting" (ZBB); and in textbooks of the 1980s, public and private sector alike, as "management by objective." The concept never changed much, but every time it received a new name, it got a public relations booster shot that kept it alive that much longer.

In the 1990s, Herbert Simon's insight celebrated the beginning of its second half-century

by returning to the stage as "benchmarking"—the identification of targets that a government wants to achieve and the continuous measurement of progress. It is a good idea. It was a good idea in 1943. But it is basically the same idea it was in 1943. It just keeps getting renamed.

*Now there is still another variation—"investment decision making"—touted by its promoters as the first real refinement of the performance budgeting idea to come along in decades. It is interesting not only because of that claim but because it is the first product of the brand-new "Design Laboratory" created under the auspices of the Alliance for Redesigning Government, chaired by David Osborne [co-author of *Reinventing Government* (1992)]. . . .*

[By] using names like "invention" and "laboratory," the believers in government reform are hoping to convince us that it is a scientific enterprise, governed by hard rules and hard data, and subject to the same precise measurements that scientists in real white coats use in real laboratories. But is it?

of national community—is “the promise of America,” maintained Croly, who was the founding editor of the *New Republic*.

Mere procedural democracy was not enough, he believed. He wanted to go well beyond majority rule to achieve consensus, or a general will. The progressive thinker was “an American Rousseau,” O’Leary points out, who insisted that in a genuine democracy “participation, debate, and deliberation function to create agreement and commitment to shared purposes.”

Unlike some later advocates of “participatory democracy,” O’Leary notes, Croly did not believe that the ideal democracy could be achieved overnight. Ignorance and apathy, habitual political conflict, and social and economic inequalities would have to be overcome first. But progress, he was sure, could be made in stages.

The first stage was “primitive” or procedural democracy. The second, described in *The Promise of American Life*, involved building a strong state to counter the power of corporations and fostering a sense of national democratic community. O’Leary says that Croly believed “that strong moral leaders, of the stature of Abraham Lincoln and Theodore Roosevelt,” would be needed to woo Americans “away from our excessive adherence to Lockean individualism.”

Then, in Croly’s third stage, “progressive democracy” was to arrive, as the burgeoning sense of national democratic community, in O’Leary’s words, “acts to heal sectional and ethnic divisions and corporate power begins to be checked by a strong federal government.” As that happens, “the need for dynamic leadership lessens and grassroots activism takes on major importance.” The voices of minorities can be more easily heard, so some of the political system’s checks against the tyranny of the majority can be safely lifted. The people are ready for more responsibility.

We now have the kind of national state that Croly wanted, O’Leary writes. Without energetic efforts to achieve the rest of Croly’s vision, his legacy could become “a large bureaucratic state vulnerable to the claims of interest groups and powerful corporations, and a pub-

lic disenchanted with democracy and prone to the excessive individualism that Tocqueville feared.”

ACLU Ad Absurdum

“Has the ACLU Lost Its Mind?” by Amitai Etzioni, in *The Washington Monthly* (Oct. 1994), 1611 Conn. Ave. N.W., Washington, D.C. 20009.

After it was founded in 1920, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) played an important role in the protection and expansion of First Amendment rights. In just its first year, it helped to gain the release of hundreds of prisoners whose only “crime” had been to speak out against World War I. During World War II, the ACLU condemned the relocation of Japanese Americans in internment camps, and during the 1950s it battled “loyalty oaths.” Today, the ACLU still does worthwhile things, such as fighting to protect the jobs of whistleblowers. More often, however, it can be found championing bizarre causes, contends Etzioni, a sociologist at George Washington University and a leader of the communitarian movement. Some examples:

- The ACLU’s New York chapter protested when Mayor Rudolph Giuliani sought to use community police officers to help locate truants and return them to school. The ACLU chapter objected because, as its executive director explained, “the cops see these kids as criminals.” Educators would be better suited to the job. But how the police view the truants is irrelevant, Etzioni points out. After all, they are not arresting the youths, just bringing them back to school, “where everyone agrees they belong.”

- The ACLU’s Southern California chapter opposes the use of metal detectors in schools, and is also against the expulsion of students caught carrying guns. That, says the chapter, could consign students “to a life even more disadvantaged than it might have been otherwise.” In short, Etzioni comments, “it’s better for all students to learn in fear of being shot than to expel the ones carrying guns.”

- The ACLU was critical of President Bill