

## POLITICS & GOVERNMENT

### *The Liberal Moment*

“Neither Machiavellian Moment nor Possessive Individualism: Commercial Society and the Defenders of the English Commonwealth” by Steve Pincus, in *American Historical Review* (June 1998), 914 Atwater, Indiana Univ., Bloomington, Ind. 47405.

Many historians believe that a fateful “republican moment” (or “Machiavellian moment,” as the title of J. G. A. Pocock’s 1975 work has it) occurred in England in the 1650s, a moment that had a formative impact on the creation of the American republic more than a century later. The moment occurred when John Milton, James Harrington, and others adopted the language of classical republicanism to criticize England’s Stuart monarchy. Reading Machiavelli, these thinkers celebrated the achievements of ancient Sparta, republican Rome, and Renaissance Venice. They had little use for the rising commercial spirit of their day. Later, according to the historians, their republican ideas of liberty and civic virtue helped inspire the American Revolution. Adding his voice to the scholarly din surrounding this assertion, Pincus, a historian at the University of Chicago, argues that if there was a purely republican moment, it didn’t last long. Pocock and others, he maintains, have lost sight of the nascent liberalism in mid-17th-century England.

Classical republicans such as Milton and Harrington wanted to resurrect an agrarian past, Pincus notes. They believed that political power depended on virtuous citizen armies, not on national wealth. Indeed, they feared the corrupting effect of wealth on the citizen. And so they had little use for the emerging commercial society of 17th-century England. But most of their fellow defenders of the English Commonwealth did not share their antagonism toward commerce, Pincus maintains.

“There can be neither peace nor security without armies, nor armies without pay, nor pay without taxes,” declared Marchamont Nedham, the chief journalist and apologist for the Rump Parliament and then Oliver Cromwell’s Protectorate. Many polemicists “assumed that wealth, not civic virtue, was the basis of political power,” Pincus notes. These writers “celebrated merchants as the most useful members of society,” favored creation of a national bank to make sure England would always have the financial wherewithal to wage war, and contended that human labor, not natural endowment, was the basis of prosperity. “These were men and women who had embraced commercial society.”

Abandoning “the possibility of establishing a government based exclusively on civic virtue,” Pincus writes, they “began to espouse a politics based on recognizing, deploying, and taming interest—a politics appropriate to a commercial society.” These same problems preoccupied the Framers of the U.S. Constitution more than a century later.

The incipient liberalism of the 17th-century thinkers—later expressed in more elegant and sophisticated form by Adam Smith and John Stuart Mill—“should not be seen as antagonistic to republicanism,” Pincus insists. Rather, they took elements of the republican tradition, especially the conception of liberty and the commitment to the common good, and combined them with a defense of commercial society. Only in this way, Pincus says, was classical republicanism able to survive.

### *Woodrow Wilson’s Retreat*

“Woodrow Wilson and Administrative Reform” by Kendrick A. Clements, in *Presidential Studies Quarterly* (Spring 1998), 208 E. 75th St., New York, N.Y. 10021.

During his career as a political scientist at Bryn Mawr, Wesleyan, and Princeton, Woodrow Wilson emerged as one of the more important progressive figures urging a dramatic expansion of the federal government’s administrative powers. Presiding over such an expansion from the White House after 1912,

however, he had second thoughts.

Like other progressives, Wilson (1856–1924) hoped to overcome what he saw as the paralysis of American government caused by the constitutional separation of powers, notes Clements, a historian at the University of South Carolina. Usually credited with having