

## 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



In 1918, Wilson was on the minds of 21,000 army officers and enlisted men at Camp Sherman, Ohio.

pioneered the academic study of public administration in the United States, Wilson argued in an 1887 article for adoption of the administrative methods of European monarchies. In *The State* (1889), he warned that industrialization was allowing “the rich and the strong to combine against the poor and the weak.” A stronger state, he believed, would be a less dangerous remedy for America’s problems than more direct popular rule. He believed in the people, “in their *honesty* and *sincerity* and *sagacity*,” Wilson stated in 1891, “but I do not believe in them *as my governors*.” He feared “tyranny of the majority [more] than dictatorship,” Clements says.

Yet while professing to believe that the government regulators of labor and industry would be apolitical, Wilson knew better, Clements says. Administrators, Wilson admitted in 1891, did not merely execute public law,

they, in effect, made it—and sometimes acted in their own selfish interests. “He was not entirely comfortable with his own proposals,” Clements writes.

That may have been why Wilson then turned his thoughts to a different cure: enlarging presidential power, an expansion already begun with the Spanish-American War (1898). By 1908, he said he was convinced that the Constitution was “thoroughly workable” and that the president had become “the unifying force in our complex system, the leader both of his party and the nation.” Wilson’s experience as governor of New Jersey (1911–12) further dampened his enthusiasm for administrative reform when the state legislature—realizing it would be surrendering power to his administrators—refused to go along with his ambitious proposals.

By the time he became president, in 1913, Wilson was more convinced than ever of the importance of vigorous presidential leadership. Yet, Clements notes, virtually all the major Wilsonian reforms, such as creation of the Federal Trade Commission, relied on professional administrators, with wide discretion, for their implementation. “As Wilson had pointed out many years before, the more government was asked to do, the more it must depend on an active administration.”

This proved even truer after America’s entry into World War I in 1917, when the War Industries Board and other special agencies were set up. The danger of an expanded state now seemed much more serious to Wilson than it had when he was an academic. He feared that the government would not be “returned to the people” when the war ended: “Big Business will be in the saddle.” In part to prevent that, he abolished the wartime agencies when the conflict ended, even though, Clements says, he favored “many of the things [the agencies] wanted to do in the postwar world.”

## Mob Rule?

“The Rising Hegemony of Mass Opinion” by Paul J. Quirk and Joseph Hinchliffe, in *Journal of Policy History* (1998, No. 1), 221 N. Grand Blvd., Saint Louis University, St. Louis, Mo. 63103.

The Founding Fathers were given to dark worries about an “excess of democracy”—and now their worst fear has been realized. Mass public opinion has become “the dominant force in American politics,” claim Quirk and Hinchliffe, a political scientist and a graduate student, respectively, at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

Only occasionally in American history did the mass public influence the making of national policy to the extent it does today, Quirk and Hinchliffe assert. Usually, “elites” of one sort or another were in charge, even if responding at times to popular opinion. The big problem was seen as the undue influence of organized interest