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Clash of governance rivals: Founders' intent vs. Progressives' challenge

Steve Bakke  September 20, 2022



A modern American reality is the dramatic division over governing and societal standards. Compromise is unheard of. Each side considers everything done by the opposition is wrong and even nonsense. There are shouts of “lock ‘em up!”

Let’s temporarily set aside the divisive personalities, raw emotions, and even the issues of the day. What is laid bare, according to Hillsdale college president and professor Larry Arnn, are two powerful movements set against each other, as they have been for over a century.

The government of our Founders is in a struggle for political dominance with the modern “Progressive Movement,” popularized most notably by Woodrow Wilson, our 28th president. As I’ve discussed here before, the early progressives couldn’t abide the Constitution’s goal of limited federal government and its natural rights. They wanted to move beyond the Founders’ original principles.

Progressives strongly objected to any rights being claimed as coming from our creator. Rather, they declared them conferred by society, i.e. government. The Founders had recognized the flaws tied to human nature and human passions. This resulted in installing checks and balances between government branches. These limitations on governmental power were perceived by progressives as barriers to essential programs. They believed that governmental power should never be limited except for what is “unwise or futile.”

Wilson insisted that mankind had advanced and matured. He assured the public that modern humans would unselfishly support the greater good. Because of that, progressives believed the Constitution hadn’t “kept up with changes of conditions,” necessitating a new constitution for some, or a “living, breathing” constitution for others.

President Calvin Coolidge opposed Wilson’s assertion that mankind had advanced beyond things such as limited government, checks and balances and other original principles. He

expressed these words in defense of the Constitution: “[Wilson’s] reasoning cannot be applied to this great charter. If all men are created equal, that is final. If they are endowed with inalienable rights, that is final. If governments derive their just powers from the consent of the governed, that is final.....If anyone wishes to deny their truth or their soundness, the only direction in which he can proceed historically is not forward, but backward toward the time when there was no equality, no rights of the individual, no rule of the people.”

When Franklin Roosevelt emerged as president, he faithfully carried the progressive torch by proclaiming a “new bill of rights.” Government would guarantee things such as earnings, recreation, and so on, an ambitious program of wealth transfer. His programs were often shot down by the Supreme Court as unconstitutional.

The “siren song” sung by early progressives was mesmerizing for some. However, the results would disappoint because human nature hasn’t changed. Automatic allegiance to the greater good won’t prevail in any human endeavor if left unchecked.

Quoting from Ronald Reagan’s farewell presidential address: “We the People’ tell the Government what to do, it doesn’t tell us.....I hope that we have once again reminded people that man is not free unless government is limited.....as government expands, liberty contracts.”

The bitter conflicts of today aren’t just a passing spat. It isn’t a mere conflict of style. The competing movements aren’t variations of a single governing philosophy. They represent very different ideologies. I’m close to concluding that a winner must and will emerge.

Having come this far in my analysis of the origins of present-day political conflicts, an essential part of what remains is to take a closer look at modern day governance to determine the impact of over a century of progressive attempts to change our system. They’ve certainly had some success, the most obvious being the “administrative state.” And there’s a question begging to be answered: “Is the administrative state entirely ill conceived?”

I remain an energized supporter of our Constitutional form of government. The Founding Principles not only make sense, but they are also comforting. The people’s self-governance is an ideal I still hold dear. Unlimited governmental power is foolish governance.

My preferences may seem idealistic. But the alternative has an impetuous quality that has no appeal. Truth has a way of finding daylight, so I’m confident a rational showing of these competing philosophies will move us in the right direction. A winner will emerge.