

Preface

“Combining Hamiltonian ends with Jeffersonian means” is perhaps the most famous phrase summarizing the character of Progressive Era liberalism. Usually attributed to Herbert Croly, the co-founding editor of *The New Republic*, the phrase also captures the essence of Croly’s highly influential book, *The Promise of American Life*.¹ That book’s importance remains undiminished, despite its growing obscurity with the general public. Ever since *The Promise of American Life* appeared in 1909, Americans’ perceptions of their political history have owed a great deal to Croly’s thoughts on American liberalism—even if they have never heard of Croly or his book.

Writing at the close of the presidency of his hero, Theodore Roosevelt, Croly believed that an urgent, fundamental reform of American politics was at hand. Decades of industrial expansion and urban growth had rendered obsolete the competitive individualism that dominated the agrarian America of the nineteenth century. In order to advance, the nation would have to create and then master a new synthesis of its chief political traditions—a revitalized liberalism that merged Thomas Jefferson’s inclusive view of justice and civic equality

¹ Croly certainly devoted large sections of his book to this theme, and to Jefferson and Hamilton. But as near as I can tell, the actual phrase first appeared nearly forty years later, and with reference not to Croly’s thoughts but Theodore Roosevelt’s New Nationalist program, in George A. Mowry, *Theodore Roosevelt and the Progressive Movement* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1947).

with the imperatives of order, economic expansion, and nationalism that Croly ascribed to Alexander Hamilton. The classical liberalism favored by old-line Jeffersonian democrats, Croly insisted, would only bring chaos to the new industrial America. Centralization, planning, and government by experts—what Croly called a “more highly socialized democracy”—had to supplant the Jeffersonians’ “excessively individualized democracy,” or the country would disintegrate.

These key observations of Croly’s have led later writers to describe his book as a landmark in the intellectual history of American politics. Classical Jeffersonian liberals had posited that a powerful centralized federal government was bound to turn predatory and secure the interests of the powerful, wealthy, well-connected few at the expense of the many. Such had been a chief contention of the pioneering British political economists of the late eighteenth century, above all Adam Smith, in their arguments with monarchical mercantilism; and such were the ideas (and the fears) proclaimed by American liberals and democrats for decades after the American Revolution. By contrast, twentieth-century American liberalism, as enunciated by Theodore Roosevelt and later augmented by his cousin, Franklin D. Roosevelt, insisted that only a powerful federal government could promote the interests of the many (or, as some of them were more likely to put it, the nation) in the vastly changed circumstances of the new century.

In industrialized and corporate America, gigantic, irresponsible private interests, and not government authority, loomed as the greatest threat to national prosperity and social justice. Whereas government was once the indispensable power in creating overweening and artificial privilege, now government had to step in to restrain unbridled individualism, eliminate wasteful inefficiency, minimize abuses of corporate power, and maxi-

mize national wealth. Modern liberals would replace laissez-faire with coherent national regulation in order to promote social harmony and national greatness, all the while countervailing the voracious private interests of the few. *The Promise of American Life* has survived as the most thorough exposition of the philosophical as well as political reasoning behind this shift—or as close to such an exposition as would ever be published.

Important though it was and is, the book does have many manifest flaws. Although remembered largely for Croly's efforts to combine the Hamiltonian and Jeffersonian legacies, *The Promise of American Life's* accounts of those legacies were badly skewed. Croly did not try to conceal his personal predilections: "On the whole," he wrote, "my own preferences are on the side of Hamilton rather than of Jefferson." But that was putting it mildly. Croly's distaste for Jefferson and Jeffersonian democracy was as systematic and palpable as it was ill-informed and at times willful. To claim, for example, as Croly did, that the Jeffersonians consented "to use the machinery of government only for a negative or destructive purpose" required ignoring, among much else, one of Jefferson's signal triumphs, the Louisiana Purchase.

Although Croly was aware that Hamilton's politics could never have governed the diverse and rambunctious American people, he turned to Jeffersonianism not out of admiration for Jefferson or his ideas, but by default, as a necessary democratic modification of the splendid Hamiltonian program.

This democratic corrective, nevertheless, was essential to Croly's appeal, as it helped to justify his book's strong insistence on social responsibility and care for the downtrodden in the new industrial era. And with its call for a bolstered nationalism and an enlarged sense of common purpose, *The Promise of American Life*

quickly became one of the rare commentaries on American political history and ideas to have an immediate political impact.

Theodore Roosevelt had recently departed from the White House but by no means from politics when he read the book in 1910. He may or may not have lifted what would become his new catch phrase, “The New Nationalism,” from Croly. Indeed, the convergence may well have been coincidental: Roosevelt certainly was moving in the same direction as Croly was, albeit from a different direction, long before the book’s publication. Still, apart from being greatly flattered by Croly’s effusive praise of him and his presidency, Roosevelt could read *The Promise of American Life* as a kind of explication and grand affirmation of his administrations’ accomplishments and aspirations—what he had called, in more piece-meal and pragmatic fashion, the Square Deal. The book’s Rooseveltian qualities certainly recommended it to the man who presented it to T.R., the progressive jurist, Learned Hand, who singled out for praise Croly’s elaboration of the “neo-Hamilton” political ideas that Roosevelt, according to Hand, had made real.²

Thereafter, a reinvigorated Roosevelt would carry those ideas forward, reformulated under the Crolyesque cognomen of the New Nationalism. In the momentous 1912 presidential campaign, as the candidate of the “Bull Moose” Progressive Party, Roosevelt proclaimed the use of “Government as an efficient agency for the practical betterment of social and economic conditions throughout this land”—a line he might as well have bor-

² Hand to Theodore Roosevelt, April 8, 1910, in Constance Jordan, ed., *The Selected Correspondence of Learned Hand* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 15.

rowed from *Promise*.³ Although defeated by the Democrat Woodrow Wilson, Roosevelt did finish a respectable second, besting the conservative Republican incumbent William Howard Taft and the Socialist Eugene V. Debs. In doing so, he advanced ideas and issues that would be contested for years to come and in some cases for a generation or more, ranging from social health and unemployment insurance to votes for women.

Croly, meanwhile, went on to help make another lasting contribution. Five years after the success of *The Promise of American Life*, with financial support from the heiress Dorothy Payne Whitney and her husband, Willard Straight, Croly joined with Walter Lippmann and Walter Weyl to launch an innovative journal of opinion, *The New Republic*. After its first issue appeared in November 1914, the magazine quickly established itself as a tribune of the new American liberalism, on a mission to push liberal politics as far as possible in the direction of active government in both domestic and world affairs. For an entire century, through editorial permutations that have kept shifting the magazine's positions across a broad spectrum of liberal thinking, *The New Republic* has remained at once a flagship and a battleground for American liberal thought.

It is thus altogether fitting that the James Madison Library edition of *The Promise of American Life* appears in the *The New Republic*'s centennial year, with an introduction by the magazine's current editor, Franklin Foer. A keen student of the Progressive era, Foer has thought hard about the ideas that helped initiate and then guide the magazine. He has also reflected on what is living and what is not in Croly's book. Most strik-

³ "Address by Theodore Roosevelt before the Convention of the National Progressive Party in Chicago, July 1912," at <http://www.ssa.gov/history/trspeech.html>.

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ingly, he takes the measure of Herbert Croly's strangeness as a man, thinker, and writer. Yet even when he enriches our understanding of Croly's peculiarities, Foer never loses sight of how Croly and his book helped to change the working assumptions of American political thought. Building in part on the Library's earlier republication of Walter Lippmann's *Liberty and the News*, this new edition of *The Promise of American Life* is also an important addition to the series. Together, Croly and Foer bring back to life a pivotal phase of the forever unfinished arguments over American democracy: what it has been, what it has become, and what its future ought to be.

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