



Students from North Carolina A&T College stage a sit-down strike after being refused service at a luncheon counter in February 1960.

# Social Movements and Progressivism

## Part Three of the Progressive Tradition Series

John Halpin and Marta Cook April 2010

Center for American Progress



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*With the rise of the contemporary progressive movement and the election of President Barack Obama in 2008, there is extensive public interest in better understanding the origins, values, and intellectual strands of progressivism. Who were the original progressive thinkers and activists? Where did their ideas come from and what motivated their beliefs and actions? What were their main goals for society and government? How did their ideas influence or diverge from alternative social doctrines? How do their ideas and beliefs relate to contemporary progressivism?*

*The new Progressive Tradition Series from the Center for American Progress traces the development of progressivism as a social and political tradition stretching from the late 19th century reform efforts to the current day. The series is designed primarily for educational and leadership development purposes to help students and activists better understand the foundations of progressive thought and its relationship to politics and social movements. Although the Progressive Studies Program has its own views about the relative merit of the various values, ideas, and actors discussed within the progressive tradition, the essays included in the series are descriptive and analytical rather than opinion based. We envision the essays serving as primers for exploring progressivism and liberalism in more depth through core texts—and in contrast to the conservative intellectual tradition and canon. We hope that these papers will promote ongoing discourse about the proper role of the state and individual in society, the relationship between empirical evidence and policymaking, and how progressives today might approach specific issues involving the economy, health care, energy-climate change, education, financial regulation, social and cultural affairs, and international relations and national security.*

*The third essay in the series examines the influence of social movements for equality and economic justice on the development of progressivism.*

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# Introduction

A rich history of social movements shaped progressive thought throughout the 19th and 20th centuries. Historian Sidney Milkis characterizes the accomplishments of the original Progressive Era as “momentous reconstructions of politics,” a description that equally applies to the numerous social movements that aimed to better align America’s political and social order with its ideals of liberty, equality, and opportunity for all.<sup>1</sup>

Progressivism as a reform tradition has always focused its moral energy against societal injustice, corruption, and inequality. Progressivism was built on a vibrant grassroots foundation, from the Social Gospel and labor movements to women’s suffrage and civil rights to environmentalism, antiwar activism, and gay rights. The activists and leaders of these movements believed deeply in the empowerment and equality of the less privileged in society, the primacy of democracy in American life, and the notion that government should safeguard the common good from unchecked individual and commercial greed. They challenged government to eliminate its own legal injustices and also harnessed the force of government as a vital tool for advancing human freedom and establishing the “more perfect union” envisioned by the Founding Fathers.

Central to all progressive social movements is the belief that the people do not have to wait for change from the top down—that people themselves can be catalysts for change from the bottom up. Many social movement activists came from middle- or working-class backgrounds and possessed the courage and skill to organize others, risking great personal sacrifice and danger. Nonviolent themselves, many of these activists faced ridicule, violence, and other hardships in their efforts to push their fellow citizens toward more enlightened positions in line with the country’s stated values.

Mainstream political parties often ignored social movement activists who engaged in public education and took to the streets to demand justice and political equality. Through direct action campaigns and political organizing they asked other Americans to join their cause as a matter of conscience and duty to their fellow human beings. As Martin Luther King Jr. famously stated in his “Letter from Birmingham Jail”:

*Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. Never again can we afford to live with the narrow, provincial “outside agitator” idea. Anyone who lives inside the United States can never be considered an outsider anywhere within its bounds.<sup>2</sup>*

The relationship between political progressivism—as expressed in the platforms and actions of political parties and leaders—and social movements has not always been harmonious or cooperative. Social movements, by definition, arise from a committed minority of citizens working together to shape larger public consciousness about particular injustices in addition to working for concrete political change. Social movements have invariably advanced moral and political causes surrounding gender, racial, and class equality with much greater force and consistency than those in mainstream politics. The ideas of social movements, such as expanded suffrage and civil rights protections, often become uncontested parts of mainstream politics after prolonged struggles. In other cases, social movements band together to create new political institutions to challenge the partisan status quo from the outside as seen with the early farmers’ alliances who formed the People’s Party and social reformers and dissident Republicans of the early 1900s who formed the Progressive Party.

Progressive leaders themselves learned from the principled activism of social movements. Many mainstream progressive political leaders in the past were reactionary on issues of race and gender. At the same time, the seeds of the great civil rights triumphs of the 20th century came from within progressivism itself. An interracial coalition of progressives joined together to create the NAACP and many leading progressives emerged from the fight for abolition and women’s suffrage. The collective efforts of these movements eventually helped to turn progressivism itself into a stronger vehicle for human equality, social tolerance, and political rights for all people.

Progressive social movements are divided into two main categories for the purposes of this essay: movements for equality and individual rights, and movements for economic justice. This division presents two questions: What, if anything, ties these movements together, and how do they fit within the larger intellectual and political tradition of progressivism?

- First, each of the movements developed in response to a grave injustice in American life that directly or indirectly affected a significant segment of society—for example, the formal inequality of women, African Americans, immigrants, and gays and lesbians led to various movements for civil rights; the poor working conditions and poverty-level subsistence of wage earners led to the rise of the labor movement.
- Second, each of these social movements worked as independent checks on mainstream progressive politics and functioned as internal factions within the progressive tradition itself.
- Third, in terms of shared values, many of these movements were grounded in the moral and philosophical inspiration of the early American tradition—particularly the Declaration of Independence, the preamble to the U.S. Constitution, and other civic republican and democratic ideals—as well as longstanding religious principles expressed in Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish faiths.

- Fourth, each of these movements in one way or another advanced the values of progressivism described in the opening essay: freedom in its fullest sense; a commitment to the common good; pragmatic reform; human equality; social justice; democracy; and cooperation and interdependence. Although sometimes radical for their times, the movements described here lie clearly within the reform tradition of American politics and many, if not all, of their original goals have been integrated into mainstream American society and government over time.

The relationship between social movements and progressivism is ultimately one of shared learning and activism in pursuit of common values. These brief summaries are not meant to be exhaustive accounts of all the major players or all the landmark events of the various movements, but rather to provide an illustrative sampling of a rich tradition that continues to shape progressivism today. Other important social movements including environmentalism, consumer protection and antiwar activism will be explored in future essays.



# Movements for equality and individual rights

Social movements for equality rest squarely on America's most cherished principles. They draw heavily from religious teachings about human dignity and solidarity, Enlightenment thought about human autonomy, and formative political documents such as the Declaration of Independence. The most complete and cumulative expression of these values in modern times was expressed in Article 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights: "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood."

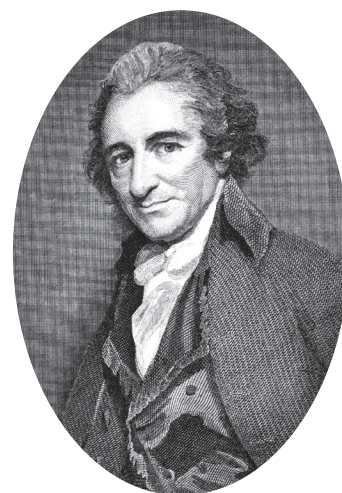
Given the deep foundations of these beliefs, it is not surprising that social movements designed to correct injustices associated with legal and societal oppression have been some of the most passionate and hard fought in American history. From abolition and women's suffrage to civil rights movements for African Americans, immigrants, and gays and lesbians, progressives have been at the forefront of defending human liberty and equality against efforts to treat certain groups of people as second-class citizens. Their combined efforts helped make America a more diverse, tolerant, and socially mobile nation.

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## Abolitionism

The "original sin of slavery," as described by President Barack Obama, produced one of the earliest and most influential progressive movements for human liberation. Abolitionism, as a worldwide movement to emancipate slaves and end the slave trade, in many ways inspired and drove all future progressive social movements for equality. The abolitionist movement not only focused on restoring the human rights of African Americans, it also represented a full-blown assault on an American economic system that exploited an entire race of people for the financial benefit of a privileged few. Although difficult to comprehend today, at the beginning of the Civil War, nearly 4 million men, women, and children were held captive as slaves in the United States—mere property in the eyes of slave owners and their defenders.<sup>3</sup>

Many of America's founding leaders, including George Washington and Thomas Jefferson, both slave owners, believed that slavery was a blemish on the United States that had to be eradicated at some point. But fearing a protracted public battle to eliminate slavery would tear apart the new nation, many of our country's founding leaders chose gradual abolition



Thomas Paine was a vocal opponent of slavery as a complete abomination to a nation seeking its own independence and freedom.

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that would end slavery over successive generations over more immediate action to free all slaves. Others like John Adams (both father and later son) and Thomas Paine were vocal opponents of slavery as a complete abomination to a nation seeking its own independence and freedom. Writing in the *Pennsylvania Journal* and the *Weekly Advertiser* in 1775, Paine declared that the “guilty [slave] Masters must answer to the final Judge,” for “Certainly, one may, with as much reason and decency, plead for murder, robbery, lewdness and barbarity, as for this practice. They are not more contrary to the natural dictates of conscience, and feeling of humanity; nay, they are all comprehended in it.”<sup>4</sup>

Southern resistance to abolition won the day, despite these and other sentiments against enslavement, and slavery was eventually sanctified in the U.S. Constitution through the three-fifths, slave trade, and fugitive slave clauses in the document. Resistance to slavery grew particularly pronounced as the 19th century progressed, with a small but growing abolitionist movement—comprised of blacks and whites, women and men—working forcefully to shape public opinion and organize opposition to the practice. These voices served as a call to conscience for the American people, reminding them that the words of the Bible and the Declaration of Independence applied to all Americans, not just ones of a particular race.

Leading abolitionists utilized the power of the written word to promote emancipation. The abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison, through his influential newspaper, *The Liberator*, helped found the American Anti-Slavery Society. Garrison passionately defended complete emancipation of slaves rather than gradual abolition in the paper’s inaugural issue arguing:

*I am aware that many object to the severity of my language; but is there not cause for severity? I will be as harsh as truth, and as uncompromising as justice. On this subject, I do not wish to think, or to speak, or to write, with moderation. No! No! Tell a man whose house is on fire to give a moderate alarm; tell him to moderately rescue his wife from the hands of the ravisher; tell the mother to gradually extricate her babe from the fire into which it has fallen; – but urge me not to use moderation in a cause like the present. I am in earnest – I will not equivocate – I will not excuse – I will not retreat a single inch – AND I WILL BE HEARD. The apathy of the people is enough to make every statue leap from its pedestal, and to hasten the resurrection of the dead.*<sup>5</sup>

David Walker, a free African American, published the fiery *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World*, in which he excoriated white Americans for their hypocrisy in keeping slaves while claiming to be Christians committed to the values of Jefferson.<sup>6</sup> Perhaps the most famous abolitionist during his time was an escaped slave, turned writer and lecturer, Frederick Douglass. Douglass describes in his autobiography the transformation of his thought toward liberation in starkly moral terms, “The more I read, the more I was led to abhor and detest my enslavers. I could regard them in no other light than a band of successful robbers, who had left their homes, and gone to Africa, and stolen us from our homes, and in a strange land reduced us to slavery. I loathed them as being the meanest as well as the most wicked of men.”<sup>7</sup>



The abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison, through his influential newspaper, *The Liberator*, helped found the American Anti-Slavery Society.

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In an 1852 speech Douglass denounced hollow proclamations of liberty and equality as a “sham” given the institution of slavery, asking, “What, to the American slave, is your 4th of July? I answer: a day that reveals to him, more than all other days in the year, the gross injustice and cruelty to which he is the constant victim.”<sup>8</sup>

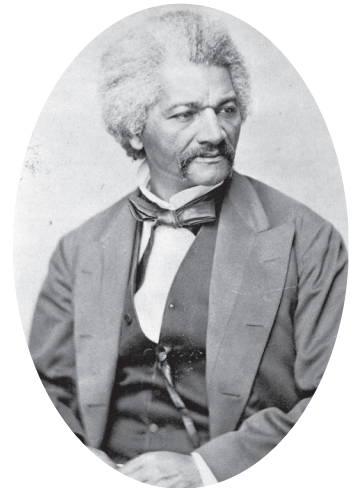
The influence of religious thought on abolitionism was profound. The origins of the movement in America are often traced to a German Quaker resolution against slavery signed in 1688. Equating the goals of abolition with the precepts of the Golden Rule, the resolution argued, “There is a saying, that we shall do to all men like as we will be done ourselves; making no difference of what generation, descent or colour they are.”<sup>9</sup> This document was not only significant as the first public declaration against slavery, but because of its central argument that all humans deserve equal rights.<sup>10</sup> Similarly, in the mid-19th century a small but dedicated group of 12 women, the Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society, advocated moral arguments against slavery, identifying their cause with the “gospel of Jesus.”<sup>11</sup>

Women emerged as strong advocates of abolitionism as many began to question their own subordinate status in America during the fight to eliminate slavery. Angelina Grimke, a lawyer, abolitionist, and suffragist from South Carolina, challenged her fellow “Southern sisters” to seize control of their own lives in doing the right thing by opposing slavery:

*Why appeal to women on this subject? We do not make the laws which perpetuate slavery. No legislative power is vested in us; we can do nothing to overthrow the system, even if we wished to do so. To this I reply, I know you do not make the laws, but I also know that you are the wives and mothers, the sisters and daughters of those who do; and if you really suppose you can do nothing to overthrow slavery, you are greatly mistaken. You can do much in every way; four things I will name. 1st. You can read on the subject. 2nd. You can pray over this subject. 3rd. You can speak on this subject. 4th. You can act on this subject.*<sup>12</sup>

Although the tragedy and injustice of slavery lasted for generations and was only ended through the Civil War and the executive leadership of Abraham Lincoln, the moral and political activism of the abolitionists contributed greatly to the formal transformations of the U.S. Constitution as represented by the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments.

Combined, these constitutional amendments permanently ended slavery and forced servitude in America; established equal protection and due process for every person regardless of race; and granted the right to vote for black men. These amendments, and the ongoing efforts to ensure that they had real meaning in practice, inspired numerous battles over the next century for liberty and equality—most immediately, with the rise of the women’s movement.



Frederick Douglass, escaped slave turned writer and lecturer, denounced hollow proclamations of liberty and equality as a “sham” given the institution of slavery.

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## Suffrage and women's rights

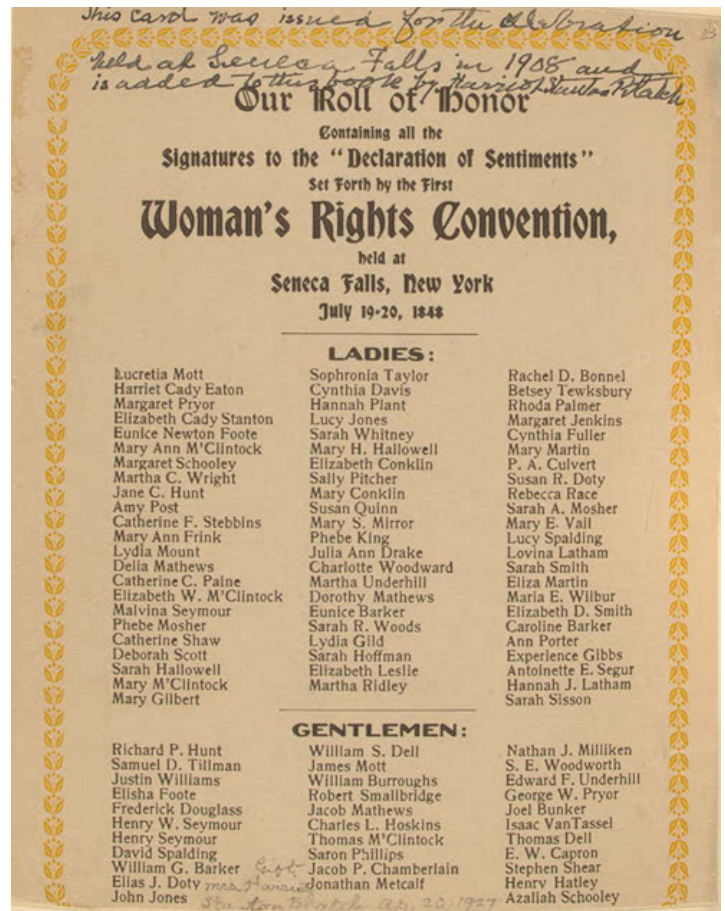
Long relegated to the domestic domain of the home, women in the early 19th century began demanding that they should have an equal standing in society as issues surrounding universal white male suffrage and abolition grew in force.<sup>13</sup> Although feminist leaders and ideas dated back centuries, the period from roughly the mid-19th to early 20th century marked the first time when women's rights became a revolutionary movement in American politics.

The abolitionist movement was the catalyst for many activists involved with the fight for women's equality, as many women who took part in the antislavery struggle learned organizing, political, and rhetorical skills that would equip them for their own rights struggle in later decades.<sup>14</sup> The relationship between women's rights leaders and abolitionists was not always congenial, however, as many feminist leaders clashed with one another and other abolitionists about whether to press for women's suffrage in conjunction with efforts to extend the franchise to black men.

The split unfortunately led some prominent feminist leaders to actually oppose the 15th Amendment because it did not include equality measures for women. These early missteps were eventually corrected as the battle for suffrage reached its apogee in the first two decades of the 20th century and many suffragists engaged in new actions to secure racial justice along with their own rights.

The Seneca Falls Convention in 1848 is considered the genesis of worldwide women's equality movements as leading American feminists and some men, including Lucretia Mott, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Frederick Douglass, came together to chart out a path for achieving equal political and economic rights for women. In her first time ever speaking in public, Stanton implored the members of the convention to "understand the height, the depth, the length, and the breadth of her own degradation."<sup>15</sup>

The convention put forth its Declaration of Sentiments and Resolutions, consciously echoing the structure and language of the Declaration of Independence—"We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men *and women* are created equal" (*italics added*). The declaration outlined the numerous violations of women's rights including the lack of



In July 1848 more than 300 men and women assembled in Seneca Falls, New York, for the nation's first women's rights convention.

the elective franchise, forced submission to laws in which women had no say, the taking of women's property and wages without their consent, and the overall subordination of women to men in family and social life. The convention resolved, "That, being invested by the Creator with the same capabilities, and the same consciousness of responsibility for their exercise, it is demonstrably the right and duty of woman, equally with man, to promote every righteous cause by every righteous means."<sup>16</sup>

Efforts to advance political equality for women gained more organizational structure coming out of Seneca Falls and in the aftermath of the Civil War. Prominent feminist leaders such as Stanton and Susan B. Anthony formed the National Woman Suffrage Association to fight a more direct battle for full voting rights and legal equality for women. On the 100-year anniversary of the Declaration of Independence, the NWSA's Declaration of the Rights of Women proclaimed:

*And now, at the close of a hundred years, as the hour-hand of the great clock that marks the centuries points to 1876, we declare our faith in the principles of self-government; our full equality with man in natural rights; that woman was made first for her own happiness, with the absolute right to herself—to all the opportunities and advantages life affords her for her complete development; and we deny that dogma of the centuries, incorporated in the codes of all nations—that woman was made for man—her best interests, in all cases, to be sacrificed to his will. We ask of our rulers, at this hour, no special favors, no special privileges, no special legislation. We ask justice, we ask equality, we ask that all civil and political rights that belong to citizens of the United States, be guaranteed to us and our daughters forever.<sup>17</sup>*

Lucy Stone, the leader of the more radical and pro-abolitionist American Woman Suffrage Association, and other suffragists argued that voting rights for women were prerequisites for other types of reforms to support women's equality. By 1916, after various state-level campaigns and successful efforts to get both major political parties to support suffrage in principle, these efforts coalesced into a final push for a constitutional amendment under the leadership of Alice Paul and Lucy Burns in the National Woman's Party. The hard work of these conventions and activism paid off with the passage of the 19th Amendment in 1920 declaring, "The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of sex."<sup>18</sup>

Feminist leaders continued to fight for equal rights for women throughout the 20th century, with a second powerful wave of feminist activism arising in the 1960s and 1970s to challenge ongoing discrimination in the workplace, in the home, and in regard to women's own bodies. Many of these feminists wanted society to move beyond important political rights and understand that discrimination was not only written into law but into the very fabric of American society. Women too often were treated as second-class citizens undeserving of equal pay for equal work or the right to control their own bodies or even the ability to determine the course of their own lives. Betty Friedan, in her landmark book, *The Feminine Mystique*, wrote,



Susan B. Anthony and other prominent feminist leaders formed the National Woman Suffrage Association to fight a more direct battle for full voting rights and legal equality for women.

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*If I am right, the problem that has no name stirring in the minds of so many American women today is not a matter of loss of femininity or too much education, or the demands of domesticity. It is far more important than anyone recognizes. It is the key to these other new and old problems which have been torturing women and their husbands and children, and puzzling their doctors and educators for years. It may well be the key to our future as a nation and a culture. We can no longer ignore that voice within women that says: "I want something more than my husband and my children and my home."<sup>19</sup>*

Feminists of Friedan's time demanded that women be allowed to achieve their own personal dreams and to be valued for themselves, not just for how well they serve their husbands and children. The Presidential Commission on the Status of Women, established by President John F. Kennedy and chaired by Eleanor Roosevelt until her death, argued in its final report in 1963 that women deserve tangible opportunities to determine their own purpose in life and that the "cycle of deprivation and retardation" must be broken to help women achieve this self-awareness in education and the workforce.

Margaret Mead, one of the principal researchers and the lead editor of the report, described how anything society determined to be "feminine" is essentially a handicap and that everything possible should be done to ensure that women have the exact same opportunities as "privileged, white, adult males" to fulfill their potentials and dreams in life. If a woman must spend numerous years at home caring for children, she should be offered more education and training later in life to compensate. If she needs more part-time work to accommodate a family, more part-time jobs should be created and valued. If a woman needs to leave her job, there should be more opportunities later in life to get back into work. Better home-maker services are needed and child care. Overall, Mead argued that all people—men and women alike—should have real choices in life based on the conditions they actually face.<sup>20</sup>

Several leading members of the commission, and others including Friedan and Shirley Chisholm, established the National Organization of Women in 1966 to carry on the work and ideas of the report and Friedan's book. NOW's original charter declared that, "We reject the current assumptions that a man must carry the sole burden of supporting himself, his wife, and family, and that a woman is automatically entitled to lifelong support by a man upon her marriage, or that marriage, home and family are primarily woman's world and responsibility—hers to dominate, his to support. We believe that a true partnership between the sexes demands a different concept of marriage, an equitable sharing of the responsibilities of home and children and of the economic burdens of their support."<sup>21</sup>

NOW continued to champion the Equal Rights Amendment first put forth in the 1920s after the successful passage of the 19th Amendment. Congress passed the amendment by 1972 and it was nearly ratified by the requisite number of states before being derailed by conservative politicians and activists like Phyllis Schlafly who made appeals to traditional gender notions and fears about changes to the family.



Shirley Chisholm, the first black woman elected to Congress and the first woman to run for the Democratic presidential nomination, also helped to establish the National Organization of Women in 1966.

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The second wave of feminist activism built on the legal successes of the first wave of women's activism and achieved many great successes in combating informal inequalities in American life. It helped pave the way for the dramatic rise in the number of women in higher education and the professions and helped to secure reproductive freedoms for women. Some women, however, felt that they were being left out of the movement, and that predominantly middle-class and white women's organizations were not adequately representing their concerns. This frustration heralded the beginning of a third wave of the feminist movement, with women of color taking the lead.

Although the promise of full equality for women in wages, professional standing, and job opportunities has not been fully realized, the effort to secure women's rights in America has been tremendously successful and demonstrably improved society in numerous ways from the quality of our workforce to the leadership of our major institutions and government offices to the stronger relationships and mutual understanding between men and women and within families.

Just as the suffrage movement arose both in conjunction with and in response to abolitionism, the second wave of women's rights activism coincided with the burgeoning civil rights movement for racial equality that reached similar heights in the 1960s. Despite differences in emphasis, both movements sought to achieve a radical transformation of government and society based upon longstanding principles of freedom and equality for all people.

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## The civil rights movement

The organized civil rights movement, as distinct from earlier efforts for racial equality, dates to 1909 and the founding of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. The effort to fully integrate African Americans into the nation's social and political life following the Civil War collapsed spectacularly with the end of Reconstruction in 1877 and the rise of segregation and white supremacy in both the South and the North.<sup>22</sup>

Combined with emerging Social Darwinist thought and pseudoscientific theories about racial intelligence and hereditary breeding, the political context was set for severe repression and terror against blacks (and other non-northern European immigrants). As historian Patricia Sullivan recounts, a wave of restrictive laws across southern states that stripped blacks of all legal rights replaced the search for racial justice. These laws—known as Jim Crow legislation—paved the way for state-sanctioned segregation and eventually the federal endorsement of “separate but equal” treatment for blacks in the *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision of 1896.<sup>23</sup>

A group of prominent white and black progressives, social reformers, academics, and writers responded to this assault on black Americans by forming the NAACP to more aggressively push for racial equality and the rights of blacks. Building on the ideas of black freedom outlined in W.E.B. Du Bois's groundbreaking book, *The Souls of Black Folk*, the Niagara Movement, a precursor to the NAACP, recommended a series of aggressive steps to secure political power and civil rights for blacks by rejecting the more accommodating stand of gradual improvement associated with Booker T. Washington, the leading black voice at the time and a proponent of finding ways to reconcile the desires of whites and blacks. The platform of the Niagara Movement called for freedom of speech, universal suffrage, the abolition of all racial distinctions based simply on race and color, the importance of work, and "the recognition of the principle of human brotherhood as a practical present creed."

The need for organized resistance from progressives became paramount after a series of antiblack riots in Atlanta and Springfield. On February 12, 1909, a biracial group of leading progressive voices including Jane Addams, John Dewey, Du Bois, Henry Moskowitz, Lillian Wald, Mary Ovington, Francis Grimke, Florence Kelley, and others issued "The Call," a statement of principle for this new effort. Written by Oswald Garrison Villard, grandson of William Lloyd Garrison, this document recalled the memory of Abraham Lincoln and wondered what he would make of the current condition of blacks in America:

*He would learn that the Supreme Court of the United States, supposedly a bulwark of American liberties, had refused every opportunity to pass squarely upon this disfranchisement of millions, by laws avowedly discriminatory and openly enforced in such manner that the white men may vote and that black men be without a vote in their government; he would discover, therefore, that taxation without representation is the lot of millions of wealth-producing American citizens, in whose hands rests the economic progress and welfare of an entire section of the country...*

*In many states Lincoln would find justice enforced, if at all, by judges elected by one element in a community to pass upon the liberties and lives of another. He would see the black men and women, for whose freedom a hundred thousand of soldiers gave their lives, set apart in trains, in which they pay first-class fares for third-class service, and segregated in railway stations and in places of entertainment; he would observe that State after State declines to do its elementary duty in preparing the Negro through education for the best exercise of citizenship.<sup>24</sup>*

The new NAACP set out to correct these injustices through organized efforts to secure the promises of the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments. The organization grew substantially through its local chapters, legal fights against discrimination and lynching, and high-profile public battles against racist propaganda such as the 1915 Klan-glorifying film, "Birth of a Nation." The NAACP added issues of economic justice to its mission by the 1930s as blacks suffered disproportionately from the Great Depression and the need for decent jobs became more pressing.<sup>25</sup>



It became increasingly difficult in the shadow of World War II for America to claim the moral high ground in its battles against fascism and communism while maintaining a de jure and de facto racial apartheid system at home. The NAACP and liberal supporters spearheaded successful efforts to get President Harry Truman to ban federal segregation in government and integrate the armed forces in 1948.<sup>26</sup> Then in 1954, Thurgood Marshall, then head of the NAACP's Legal Defense and Education Fund, led the organization's most famous assault on state-sponsored white supremacy by arguing the case against school segregation in *Brown v. Board of Education*. As a result of his efforts, the Supreme Court declared in a unanimous decision, "We conclude that in the field of public education the doctrine of 'separate but equal' has no place. Separate facilities are inherently unequal."

Reactionary forces in the southern states fiercely resisted efforts to dismantle Jim Crow and a new wave of resistance against blacks began again in earnest. Burgeoning White Citizens' Councils and the Ku Klux Klan carried out economic assaults and terrorist campaigns against blacks and their supporters throughout the region. President Dwight Eisenhower eventually had to dispatch federal troops to protect nine black students from racist mobs seeking to block the school desegregation order in Little Rock, AR.

Beyond the important legal and legislative work of the NAACP—which eventually paved the way for the monumental Civil Rights and Voting Rights Acts of 1964 and 1965—it would take additional direct action by legions of ordinary blacks (and white supporters) to fully cement racial equality in American society. Martin Luther King Jr. began his ministry at the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, AL in the same month that the momentous *Brown* decision was delivered. King, E.D. Nixon (former head of the Montgomery NAACP), Ralph Abernathy, and Rosa Parks decided to frontally assault the entire Jim Crow infrastructure through actions of civil disobedience and nonviolent confrontation with the white power structure. The famous Montgomery bus boycott that began with Parks's refusal to give up her seat on a local bus sparked a wave of citizen action across the South. King, as head of the Montgomery Improvement Association, succinctly outlined the moral and political cause for civil rights activism:

*We are here this evening to say to those who have mistreated us so long that we are tired—tired of being segregated and humiliated; tired of being kicked about by the brutal feet of oppression. We have no alternative but to protest ... In our protest, there will be no cross burnings. No white person will be taken from his home by a hooded Negro mob and brutally murdered ... If we protest courageously, and yet with dignity and Christian love, when the history books are written in the future, somebody will have to say, "There lived a race of people, of black people, of people who had the moral courage to stand up for their rights. And thereby they injected a new meaning into the veins of history and civilization."*<sup>27</sup>

After sustaining the boycott for more than year, the Supreme Court eventually ruled that Montgomery's bus laws were unconstitutional. Coming out of this successful effort, King, with the help of Bayard Rustin and Stanley Levison, brought together other ministers



Thurgood Marshall led the NAACP's most famous assault on state-sponsored white supremacy by arguing the case against school segregation in *Brown v. Board of Education*.

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in the new Southern Christian Leadership Conference, an institution that along with the NAACP would help orchestrate and lead some of the most important direct action campaigns of the civil rights era. The power of faith traditions and moral teachings in sparking change and sustaining activism cannot be overstated, as was the case with other social movements for equality described above. Joseph Lowery, a founding member of the SCLC, described civil rights actions of blacks as akin to the Israelites being led out of the desert to their liberation.<sup>28</sup>

Students also contributed greatly to civil rights efforts as many were organized into “freedom rides” and “sit-ins” (started earlier by groups like the Congress of Racial Equality, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, and the NAACP) to challenge discriminatory policies on buses and in local businesses. The civil rights movement reached a turning point by 1963. The violent reaction of Bull Connor, the Birmingham public safety commissioner, and other white elites to the SCLC’s antisegregation efforts in Birmingham produced shocking televised images of policeman using dogs and fire hoses on teenage protestors. The terrorist actions continued as the SCLC’s headquarters were bombed and four black girls were killed in the Sixteenth Avenue Baptist Church in Birmingham. Mainstream whites in the South and other parts of the country found it increasingly untenable to support, even if not overtly, a system of black discrimination that condoned such horrible acts.

The famous March on Washington took place in the summer of 1963 and following President Kennedy’s assassination, President Lyndon Johnson and civil rights leaders finally secured passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. The legislation forever banned racial, ethnic, sexual, and religious discrimination in employment, education, and public accommodation. The 1965 attack on civil rights marchers in Selma, AL with clubs and tear gas sparked more outrage and helped secure the passing of a second pillar of legislative action, the Voting Rights Act of 1965. The new law banned Jim Crow limitations of voting through literacy tests and called for federal enforcement of voting rights throughout the South.

The civil rights movement soon splintered over issues of “black power” and the increasingly radical actions of dissident groups who opposed the strategy of legal reform and nonviolent resistance favored by the NAACP and leaders such as King. But the power of their ideas continued and the original efforts to achieve civil rights for blacks became the model for numerous other progressive movements for equality that continue today.

Cesar Chavez and the United Farm Workers used nonviolent protests and labor strikes to fight for decent wages and living standards for Latino agricultural workers. Groups such as the National Council of La Raza were formed to extend the civil rights advances of the 1960s to Hispanic Americans. A vibrant immigrants’ rights campaign exists to secure legal, political, and economic opportunities for the millions of Mexicans and South and Central Americans living and working in our country.

Similarly, the modern gay rights movement is closely associated with the original goals, values, and structure of the civil rights movement. Arising out of the 1969 Stonewall uprising against police harassment in Greenwich Village, the gay rights movement grew from a small collection of activists to a national and international force for equal treatment and acceptance of gays and lesbians. Before Stonewall, gay persecution was considered a “city sport” according to Martin Boyce, a participant in the conflict.<sup>29</sup>

The progressive search for greater equality initially rests on securing concrete political and legal rights for groups and individuals suffering demonstrable injustices, as each of these efforts highlights. But legal protections alone do not ensure genuine equality of life opportunity for all people in a world with serious class and global divisions. Prior to his assassination, King himself began to forcefully denounce economic oppression and imperialism in strong moral terms. King declared in his famous 1967 speech against the war in Vietnam that we must confront “the fierce urgency of now,” and seek “justice throughout the developing world.”<sup>30</sup> Building on a series of marches and protests throughout northern cities, King started the Poor People’s Campaign to secure adequate employment, housing, and guaranteed incomes for the least well-off Americans, black and white.

King believed that the focus on economic justice constituted the “second phase” of civil rights activism for equality that would be won by pursuing an economic bill of rights, an idea first contemplated by Franklin Roosevelt.<sup>31</sup> The fight for economic justice constitutes the second major pillar of progressive social movement activity over the past century.

# Movements for economic justice

At the turn of the 20th century, the nation as a whole began to experience unprecedented increases in prosperity with the advent of industrial capitalism, a rising class of wage earners, and shifts in agricultural production. But the many people left out of this growth and opportunity experienced widespread hardship. As a result, the search to build a more humane economic order—with decent living and work standards for all people—became the chief focus of a variety of progressive social movements in the 19th and 20th centuries. The overall goal of these disparate movements was to increase the welfare of both workers and society at large and to create more cooperative forms of economic behavior that would replace the chaos of depression, class antagonism, and poverty that plagued the period.

The industrial revolution in 19th century America allowed for production on a scale never seen before, with economic output rising exponentially. As historian Nell Irvin Painter recounts: “In 1889 the United States produced 1,705,000 tons of rails; in 1900, 2,672,000 tons. In 1889 factories, mines, and railroads used 23,679,000 horsepower; in 1900, 37,729,000, not counting the use of the popular new electric motors. Between 1889 and 1900 the production of raw steel doubled, from 5,865,000 tons to 11,227,000 tons. Total manufacturing capital soared from \$5,697,000,000,000 in 1889 to \$8,663,000,000,000 in 1900.”<sup>32</sup>

Although big capitalists including Jay Gould, John D. Rockefeller, J.P. Morgan, and Andrew Carnegie made tremendous profits during this period, economic gains were not evenly distributed and often came at the expense of the working classes. The overall distribution of wealth and income by 1890 was massively skewed to the top with the richest 12 percent of families controlling 86 percent of the nation’s wealth and the bottom 88 percent owning just 14 percent of the wealth.<sup>33</sup>

Rather than a rising tide lifting all boats, life for many farmers and workers got measurably worse. One-fifth of children under the age of 15 had to work to keep up family budgets. Men and women had to put in 12 or more hours a day, six or seven days a week, in factories and on farms. Families were often crammed into unsafe and unsanitary tenement housing or in crowded blocks near factories with no indoor plumbing or electricity. Factory machines themselves were often dangerous to operate and many workers were injured, and subsequently forced out of work, or killed as a result. Farmers faced fickle prices for crops, rising debts, and onerous market conditions even with overall increases in

production and crop output. Many were going into deep debt to pay for imported machinery that faced steep tariffs, to pay for rent or mortgages on land they did not own, or to pay inequitable rates to the railroads to take their goods to markets across the country.

Out of these conditions arose a variety of social movements designed to improve the lot of ordinary Americans and fundamentally restructure government and the economy to better respond to the needs of lower-income citizens. Their efforts paved the way for the modern social protections many of us take for granted today and contributed to the rise of America's great middle class and a period of shared prosperity unmatched at any point in our history.

The famous self-taught land economist Henry George best captured the frustrating contradiction of rising poverty amid rising wealth in his highly influential 1879 book, *Progress and Poverty*: “Why, in spite of increase in productive power, do wages tend to a minimum which will give but a bare living?”<sup>34</sup>

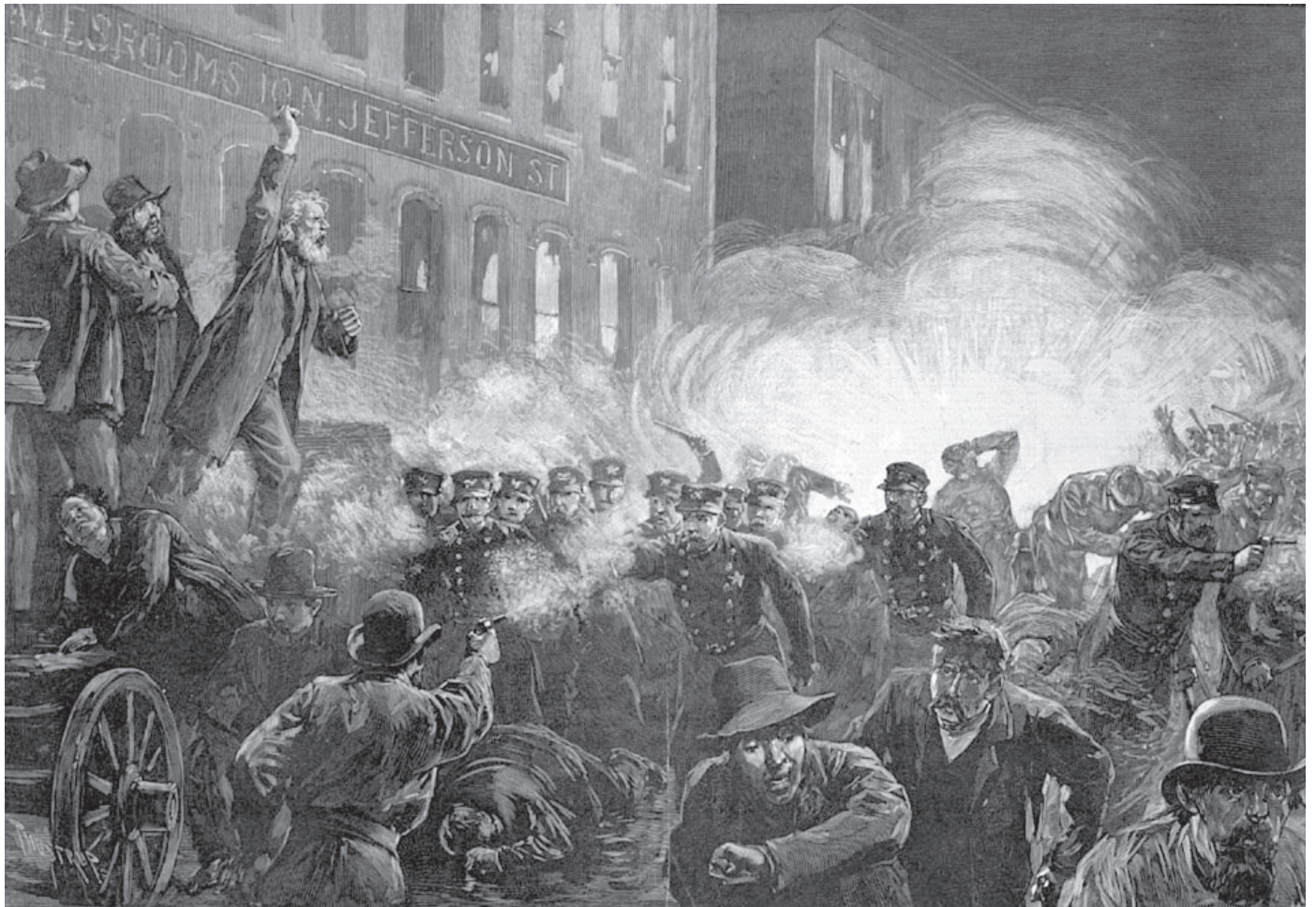
A number of groups and individuals put forth a multitude of rationales for the causes and solutions to the larger problems of economic hardship for the masses during this period. Grangers and Farmers' Alliances sought easier access to credit and new markets. Greenbackers and Silverites proposed monetary reforms to increase purchasing power and reduce debts for laborers and farmers. Single Taxers like Henry George argued for progressive taxation on speculative land ownership. Utopian writers like Edward Bellamy called for a “cooperative commonwealth” to replace competitive capitalism. Social Gospel proponents argued for the application of Christian values throughout government and the economy. Labor unions sought collective bargaining power, arbitration, and the selective use of strikes to get better wages and working conditions. Populists of various stripes called for social protections, municipal ownership of utilities, and railroad reforms. Settlement house founders like Jane Addams sought to uplift immigrants and the lower classes through education, art, and basic services. Middle-class progressive reformers aimed to fight corruption in politics and promote greater democratic control over government.<sup>35</sup>

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## The labor movement

Organized resistance to laissez-faire and the economic status quo did not reach a point of significant political influence despite frenetic reform efforts throughout the late 19th century. This changed, however, with the rise of the labor movement and populism. Coming out of a massive railroad strike that started in Baltimore in 1877, the nascent Knights of Labor began to grow substantially in response to the confluence of corporate and government power seeking to prevent workers from pressing for fair wages and work standards. Despite earlier efforts at organizing workers such as the National Labor Union, the Knights of Labor emerged as the first union with real national reach and strength. By the middle of the 1880s, the Knights of Labor's membership hit 750,000—the largest union membership in U.S. history at that point—after successful railroad strikes convinced





legions of oppressed workers to join.<sup>36</sup> The preamble to the group's official constitution decried the growing "pauperization" of the industrial working classes and aimed to achieve "the greatest good for the greatest number" through labor reforms including equal pay for women, the reservation of public lands for the public rather than the railroads, reduction in work hours, the abolition of convict and child labor, and mandated arbitration.

The group's influence waned substantially following the deadly Haymarket Square riot in 1886 when a rally to support striking workers turned violent and several policemen and civilians died. The arrest and rapid conviction of several suspected anarchists involved in the riot fueled a wave of paranoia and backlash against the labor movement and its supposed foreign influence. As more people grew skeptical of labor activism, workers organized into more specific trade unions under the banner of the American Federation of Labor. Then in 1894, Eugene Debs, the head of the American Railway Union and a later Socialist Party candidate for president, led workers in a strike against the Pullman car company to protest the firing of one-third of the workforce, 30 percent reductions in wages

The 1886 Haymarket Square riot, in which several policemen and civilians died, fueled a wave of paranoia and backlash against the labor movement.

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for the rest, and excessive rent and food costs for workers forced to live in the company's self-built "city." Other unions joined in to help bring rail traffic to a halt across the Midwest and press the case of the striking workers. President Grover Cleveland, a conservative Democrat, sent federal troops to Chicago to quell the strike at the behest of the company owner, George Pullman. Violence ensued between strikers and the troops and Debs and other leaders were eventually jailed for violating an injunction.

The labor movement began to splinter as more radical elements such as the Industrial Workers of the World and socialists, and more conservative unions like the AFL, fought for positioning with American workers. Organized labor membership ebbed and flowed throughout the early part of the 20th century, and then exploded in numbers and influence after the Great Depression and New Deal labor reforms of FDR. Labor represented a full 36 percent of the workforce by the end of World War II.

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## Reforms for farmers

On the agrarian side of reform efforts, important groups like the Grangers and the Farmer's Alliances had been gaining in strength and numbers. These groups helped organize farmers into new cooperative markets and political advocacy efforts to press for fair treatment and financial security measures for their families and communities. But the movement did not gain significant political power until the creation of the People's Party in the 1890s.

On July 4, 1892, in Omaha, the People's Party (also known as the Populists) laid out their national vision for a new society built on economic justice and the republican principles of the nation through a new theory of government action: "We believe that the power of government—on other words, of the people—should be expanded ... as rapidly and as far as the good sense of an intelligent people and the teachings of experience shall justify, to the end that oppression, injustice, and poverty shall eventually cease in the land." The platform put forth a host of reforms that served as the basis for many future progressive actions: a graduated income tax, eight-hour work day, pensions, restrictions on corporate money in politics, direct election of senators, and more radical notions like the nationalization of railroads and telegraph service.<sup>37</sup>

The Populists joined forces with the Democrats in 1896 to nominate William Jennings Bryan, a champion of agrarian concerns, for the presidency. In the first of his three runs for the office, Bryan built a mass following of farmers and laborers committed to significant economic and political reforms. He transformed the Democratic Party from its limited government roots into a modern vehicle for effective government on behalf of the people. Bryan recognized, as did later reformers under the banner of the Progressive Party, that democratic control of the economy was essential to stop abuses by corrupt corporations and politicians and to implement stronger government social protections and opportunities for economic advancement.



What held these disparate economic justice movements together in terms of their underlying philosophy?

These economic social movements drew on numerous sources including rising social justice sentiment in Christian and Jewish thought, a longing for the civic republican ideals of Jefferson and the Founding Fathers, rising labor solidarity, and new social science research in the fields of sociology and economics that explained the interdependence of individuals within society and the economy. Monsignor John Ryan, a Catholic theologian and future adviser to Franklin Roosevelt, captured this emerging stew of ideas of succinctly in his 1906 treatise, *A Living Wage*:

*The function of the State is to promote the social welfare. The social welfare means in practice the welfare of all individuals over whom the State has authority; and the welfare of the individual includes all those conditions that assist in the pursuit of his earthly end, namely, the reasonable development of his personality ... In addition to this, the State is charged with the obligation of promoting social prosperity. That is to say, its task is not merely to provide men with the opportunities that are absolutely essential to right living but also to furnish as far as practicable the conditions of wider and fuller life.<sup>38</sup>*

Together, the theoretical and practical efforts of the labor and populist movements helped to charter a middle path between laissez-faire capitalism and socialism, and in the process, laid the foundations of a distinctly American regulatory and social welfare state that shapes our nation to this day.

# Conclusion

Across this series of papers, we've learned that the successful development of progressivism in its beginning years depended upon several factors. It required new ideas and philosophical perspectives to challenge the status quo and provide an intellectual foundation for a new form of politics that harnessed government action for the benefit of the many. It required leaders in local and national government to carry these ideas forward and build coalitions necessary to turn the ideas into concrete policies that culminated in transformative legislation and societal realignment. It required outside visionaries and activists to raise the alarm about gross injustices in society and to offer sometimes far-reaching solutions to these problems.

For contemporary progressives, the phrase “everything old is new again” takes on real meaning when exploring this history and political thought. The challenges we face today may be more complicated and global in perspective than those faced by our predecessors, but the foundational questions for our actions remain. Do we believe that government plays a vital role in promoting human freedom and opportunity or do we think people should be left alone without protections or support? Should markets and corporations be free to do as they please or do they require effective management and regulation to maximize both private and public gain? Are all of our people deserving of individual rights, life opportunities, and personal dignity or do we accept inequalities and differences as inevitable? Do we have obligations to one another and to a shared purpose within our society or should we focus on our own well-being and let others do the same? These principles will continue to guide progressives for the generations to come.

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