

Constitutional Corner: Progressivism, What It Is and What it Believes. Part 2: Two Progressive Presidents.

Note: this is the second installment in a series exploring Progressivism. The topic is also the subject of our discussion on my weekly radio show: “We the People – the Constitution Matters,” broadcast live on Friday mornings from 7-8am on WFYL radio, AM1180. The show can be heard live on the station’s website: www.1180wfyl.com, or via a recorded podcast. The public is invited to join the discussion.

This turned out to be an interesting assignment: investigate the lives of perhaps our two most well-known progressive presidents: Teddy Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson. As I studied the two men it was amazing to see the connections and similarities between them.

Wilson was born only two years before Roosevelt and died five years after him so the two men were basically contemporaries. They were both born into affluent families, definitely beneficiaries of what the left today calls “white privilege.” Roosevelt’s father was a wealthy businessman, Wilson’s a prominent Presbyterian minister in a long line of ministers. Both men had to overcome childhood afflictions: Roosevelt, severe asthma and poor eyesight; Wilson, dyslexia that kept him from reading until age 12. Yet, both graduated from Ivy League colleges: Roosevelt from Harvard, Wilson from Princeton. Both attended law school, although Wilson dropped out. Both studied under college professors enamored with Hegelian political and historical theory.

Both men were elected Governor of their state, Roosevelt, in New York, much earlier than Wilson, in New Jersey. And both men faced off in the 1912 election for President of the U.S. Both men were awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for actions as President. Finally, both men were racists. Both subscribed to the theory that the Aryan races were the most advanced in history and needed to be kept that way. Each supported both positive as well as negative eugenics.

That’s where the similarities end, most at least.

There were also big differences in their lives: Roosevelt spent much of his early life in public service. He was the youngest elected New York State Assemblyman, was appointed to the U.S. Civil Service Commission by President Harrison, appointed to the NY City Police Board by the Mayor of New York, and appointed Assistant Secretary of the Navy by President William McKinley. He was selected as McKinley’s running mate for McKinley’s second term in 1900 and the pair were successful in getting themselves elected. Six months after taking the oath of office as Vice-President, Roosevelt found himself taking the oath as President; McKinley had been assassinated. Roosevelt went on to be re-elected as President in 1904 before deciding to take a hiatus from public office at the end of that term.

All this time Wilson was getting his Doctorate at Johns Hopkins and then teaching in a variety of universities before being named President of Princeton in 1902. He stepped down from running Princeton in order to run for Governor of New Jersey, and he interrupted his term as Governor to run for President.

Roosevelt came into the presidency after a long period of unfettered growth in American business and manufacturing. Some businesses had grown to enormous size: U.S. Steel Corporation became America's first \$1 Billion company in 1900. Large corporations were forming trusts to suppress their competition. A host of social problems were reaching national scope: poor working conditions, low wages, child labor, adulterated and spoiled foods. The time was right for someone willing to "fix" things. "...I cannot say that I entered the Presidency with any deliberately planned and far-reaching scheme of social betterment,"¹ said Roosevelt in his autobiography, but plunge into "social betterment" he did nevertheless.

Roosevelt studied under Professor John Burgess at Columbia, a man enamored with Hegel and all things German -- and I'm sure that had some effect on him. But I get the impression from my study that Roosevelt would have approached the job of president pretty much the same way without that progressive indoctrination. "From an early age, Theodore Roosevelt thought that he could single-handedly save America,"² writes Judge Andrew Napolitano in his book "Theodore and Woodrow, How Two American Presidents Destroyed Constitutional Freedom." "Roosevelt was psychologically incapable of accepting a secondary role in the government,"³ write Alfred H. Kelly & Winfred A. Harbison in "The American Constitution, Its Origins and Development." Unlike Wilson, who put the Constitution and the Founders' worldview under a microscope while studying for his PhD, Roosevelt simply felt supremely confident in his own abilities, particularly his decision making power. He had faced death in the charge up San Juan Hill, he felt tested and proven. He is the best example I've encountered of a human perpetual-motion machine.

Unfortunately, Roosevelt's progressivism (and later Wilson's) was hampered by the Constitution. At the turn of the 19th century, the Supreme Court still saw the Constitution largely as the Framers had: one of limited and enumerated powers. There had been no constitutional amendments since the Reconstruction Amendments immediately following the Civil War; amending the Constitution was hard and time-consuming. Yet, national problems demanded action.

¹ Theodore Roosevelt, "The Presidency: Making an Old Party Progressive," in *The Rough Riders, An Autobiography* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1913), p. 614-615.

² Andrew Napolitano, "Theodore and Woodrow, How Two American Presidents Destroyed Constitutional Freedom." (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2012), p. 19.

³ Alfred H. Kelly & Winfred A. Harbison, *The American Constitution, Its Origins and Development*, (New York, W. W. Norton & Co. 1970), p. 587.

In his autobiography, Roosevelt stated his theory of the presidency: “My belief was that it was not only [the President’s] right but his duty to do anything that the needs of the nation demanded unless such action was forbidden by the Constitution or by the laws” This is, of course, diametrically opposed to the constitutional philosophy of the Founders, all except Hamilton perhaps..

So what actions did Roosevelt take as President that stretched or ignored constitutional limitations?

Ever the “war hawk”, Roosevelt sent troops into many Caribbean countries⁴ and established new governments in several of them without congressional approval.

He ordered General John Schofield to seize coal mines closed by striking miners even though he acknowledged the action “might be unconstitutional.” The General was to ignore “any authority...but my own,” Roosevelt said.

He secretly negotiated a treaty with Japan to allow Japan to take over Korea in exchange for leaving China for American conquest.

When the Senate refused to ratify a treaty he had negotiated with a South American country, Roosevelt simply renamed it an Executive Agreement and proceeded to implement it unilaterally.

He proposed and signed the Pure Food and Drug Act,⁵ which now gives the FDA the authority to tell us what we can and cannot eat and drink. Today, the FDA jails people for selling raw milk, even to adults fully aware it is not pasteurized.

Roosevelt gave us the Interstate Commerce Commission whose regulation of commerce leads to higher prices, poorer service, reduced profits and diminished competition.

To try to “fix” the Supreme Court’s antiquated Founders-deferential view, Roosevelt nominated Oliver Wendell Holmes. Holmes brought to the Court a distinct disdain for Natural Law and he stands today as one of the Court’s most progressive jurists.

Roosevelt dared Congress to impeach him.

Speaker of the House Joe Cannon⁶ complained that Roosevelt had “no more use for the Constitution than a tomcat has for a marriage license.”⁷

⁴ Including actions in Colombia, Panama, Honduras, Dominican Republic, and Cuba.

⁵ Constitutionality upheld under Commerce Clause in *Hipolite Egg Co. v. U.S.* (1911).

⁶ Served as Speaker from 1903 to 1911.

In his book: *“Presidential Courage, Brave Leaders and How They Changed America, 1789-1989,”* author Michael Beschloss singles out Roosevelt for his toughness in personally settling a coal strike, but presents the act as though settling labor strikes is just one of the President’s many official/constitutional duties. This warped view of constitutional powers is not uncommon among progressives.

One progressive author sums up Roosevelt’s presidency this way:⁸ “The decisive and benevolent--if possibly unconstitutional--actions that Theodore Roosevelt took benefitted America by making it a more equal and progressive place.” Possibly unconstitutional? Interpretation: the Constitution must not be allowed to become an obstacle to “progress.” If it must be violated, so be it.

Roosevelt, for all the damage he did by expanding the traditional powers of the president, is almost universally acclaimed as one of our great presidents; you don’t get your face carved on Mount Rushmore for nothing.

In 1912, after three years of exploring Africa, Roosevelt returned to politics. But failing to secure the Republican nomination for president, he wrangled the nomination instead of the Progressive Party. Republicans nominated William Howard Taft, and the Democrats: Woodrow Wilson. Roosevelt’s continued popularity with the American people pulled enough Republican votes from Taft that Wilson was able to succeed instead. Taft finished a distant third.

While Roosevelt felt very strongly in the strength of the American people to govern themselves, Woodrow Wilson saw them almost as a subclass who, quote: “must get their ideas very absolutely put and are much readier to receive a half-truth which they can promptly understand than a whole truth which has too many sides to be seen all at once.” Such people need a strong leader.

Woodrow Wilson’s approach to the Presidency was one of a seasoned academic, expert in the science of government, but also someone steeped in Hegelian Historicism and Rousseauian Social Compact Theory. It is safe to say that Wilson is the only man to ever take the oath as President with a clear goal to remake the U.S. government in his own image, with the possible exception of our current president.

Wilson is credited with creating the phrase “Living Constitution.” Wrote Wilson: “...government is not a machine, but a living thing. It falls, not under the theory of the universe, but under the theory of organic life. It is accountable to Darwin, not to Newton.”

⁷ Quoted in *Presidential Courage, Brave Leaders and how They Changed America, 1789-1989*. Simon & Schuster, 2007, p.137.

⁸ <http://www.let.rug.nl/usa/essays/1901-/theodore-roosevelts-broad-powers-erin-ruth-leonard.php>

Wilson signed the Federal Reserve Bill into law, creating the Federal Reserve and ensuring the U.S. would never again have a sound currency. Wilson was actually supported by the banks for election in 1912 because he had pledged to sign the Federal Reserve act. President Taft had fought the Act while in office, so Taft had to be replaced.

Wilson promoted ratification of the 17th Amendment, destroying federalism and one important check on federal power.

Wilson was a loyal son of the old South who regretted the outcome of the Civil War.⁹ He re-segregated the U.S. Navy and allowed his cabinet ministers to re-segregate their departments. When a delegation of black leaders finally obtained an audience with Wilson, he claimed his actions were “to avoid friction” and “for their own good.” Wilson hosted a private showing of the KKK-glorifying movie “Birth of a Nation” (some claim he was actually a member of the Klan¹⁰). Some subtitles in the silent movie were direct quotations from Wilson’s scholarly writings.¹¹

After deciding that America needed to be involved in the war in Europe after all, Wilson initiated a military conscription program (slavery?) to produce the forces needed.

In one essay, Wilson writes: “While we are followers of Jefferson, there is one principle of Jefferson’s which no longer can obtain in the practical politics of America. You know that it was Jefferson who said that the best government is that which does as little governing as possible... But that time is passed. America is not now and cannot in the future be a place for unrestricted individual enterprise.”

There is little doubt Wilson’s indoctrination with progressivism came while he studied at Johns Hopkins University. He spent three years there under the tutelage of Hegelian-trained professors. During this period and later, Wilson wrote many essays which vividly show his connection to Hegelian Historicism.

Ignoring the lessons of John Adams’ Alien and Sedition Laws, Wilson sought and signed new Espionage and Sedition Laws that made it a crime to speak disparagingly of the government or act in any way counter to government policy.

Wilson was so obsessed with creating a new world order, one of perpetual peace, that he was crestfallen when his plans for the League of Nations were derailed. In 1919, midway into his second term as President he suffered a stroke which nearly incapacitated him; it permanently paralyzed his left side and blinded his left eye. For some reason Wilson felt sufficiently capable

⁹ <http://www.bu.edu/professorvoices/2013/03/04/the-long-forgotten-racial-attitudes-and-policies-of-woodrow-wilson/>

¹⁰ <http://allday.com/post/1398-11-people-you-wouldnt-believe-used-to-be-in-the-kkk/>

¹¹ Ibid.

to remain in office, but he was effectively sidelined and remained out of sight. He died four years after leaving office.

So what are we to make of this? Two of our forty-four presidents set out to do “big things,” whooptido!

As I reflect on these two men and their exploits I am first struck by how much the American people seemed in agreement with or at least ambivalent over their approach to presidential powers. This should come as no surprise. As we will see when we examine the progressive influence on public education, by 1912, progressives had already made their mark on public education, not to the extent they have today perhaps, but the fact that there was little to no backlash over Roosevelt’s or Wilson’s “grandstanding” indicates to me that progressive brainwashing was well underway.

As I said earlier, progressive historians give both men high marks for their efforts to expand the powers of the president, but these usurpations set precedents that future presidents would follow and expand upon. The Constitution suffered deep and permanent wounds under both men.

Next week we will examine two more progressive Presidents: FDR and LBJ on WFYL Radio. I hope you can join us Friday morning for the live broadcast (7am) or listen to the re-broadcast on Saturday (11am) or Sunday (2pm).

“Constitutional Corner” is a project of the Constitution Leadership Initiative, Inc. To unsubscribe from future mailings by Constitution Leadership Initiative, [click here](#).