

1

The Big Change Moments

Major change happens in history for three major reasons. The first are what I call earthshaking events: wars, revolutionary new technological advances, and other types of cataclysmic incidents (natural disasters, large-scale acts of terrorism, and economic meltdowns). Many people subscribe to the myth that only when these milestones take place does big change happen. Clearly, however, when you look back at history, you can see that this myth is false. For example, the Jeffersonian expansion that was epitomized by the Louisiana Purchase, the mass democratization of politics in the Jacksonian era, the economic changes of the Gilded Age, the Progressive Era reforms, the ending of Jim Crow, and the passage of Medicare-Medicaid all happened during periods of peace and relative economic stability.

A second kind of change results when groundbreaking new policies are enacted that literally change the way people live and think and affect how political power is distributed. The final category of change moments encompasses what I call intellectual change moments: debates over fundamental issues and ideas, such as may be expressed in speeches and books. Obviously, all of these various kinds of change interact with one another. Debates over issues and dramatic speeches and books cause new policies to be enacted and can even provoke wars. Life-changing events such as wars or technological developments certainly create extreme intellectual

8 THE PROGRESSIVE REVOLUTION

ferment and frequently result in new laws being passed. But for the purposes of this book, I want to focus on the latter two: the speeches and the books that reframed our political and legislative debates and the policy changes that moved the country in a new direction.

I would argue that a very small number of moments in our political and intellectual history were truly harbingers for major change. Here are the ones that I think have been most crucial.

On the policy side of things, I believe that eleven key new laws—or, in the case of Supreme Court rulings, interpretations of laws—signified big, dramatic moments in the history of the United States that created long-lasting change:

1. The enactment of the U.S. Constitution (1789)
2. The enactment of the Bill of Rights (1791)
3. The set of reforms Lincoln and the Republicans passed in the 1860s that derived from the Civil War and the ending of slavery
4. The 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments to the U.S. Constitution, passed by the Republicans after Lincoln's death, which abolished slavery and forever changed the relationship between the federal government and the states
5. The terrible deal that ended Reconstruction and sold out African Americans in 1877
6. The series of conservative Supreme Court decisions, culminating with *Plessy v. Ferguson* in the late 1800s, that created a structure of corporate dominance over individual rights and white dominance over African Americans
7. The Progressive Era reforms of the early 1900s, which included breaking up corporate trusts, creating the national park system, passing food safety legislation, establishing a progressive income tax, and women's suffrage
8. The New Deal reforms of the 1930s
9. The civil rights and voting rights legislation of the 1960s

10. Medicare and Medicaid

11. The environmental legislation of the 1970s

These are the laws and the policies that reshaped history, that are affecting us even as we sit here today. Some are conservative, like those awful Supreme Court decisions in the late 1800s, and some are a blend of conservative and progressive, such as the U.S. Constitution. But they were all policies that had a deep and fundamental impact on how the country is structured.

Less dramatic and less sudden have been the long and gradual battles, many of which continue to this day, over issues such as who gets to vote or who gets a quality education.

These policy battles will be discussed throughout this book, but even more central to my narrative will be the debates and the ideas behind them, which in many ways have had a bigger impact on America's history than the policy changes have. By my count, there have been ten books, speeches, documents, and debates that have fundamentally changed the history of the nation.

1. Tom Paine's *Common Sense* (1776)
2. The Declaration of Independence (1776)
3. The debate over the Constitution and the Bill of Rights (1787–1791)
4. The debate over the Alien and Sedition Acts (1798–1801)
5. John C. Calhoun's states' rights movement (which began in the 1830s)
6. Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address (1863)
7. William Jennings Bryan's "Cross of Gold" speech (1896)
8. Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962)
9. Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech (1963)
10. Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963)

All of these books, debates, and speeches literally shifted the way people thought about politics and issues and the role of

10 THE PROGRESSIVE REVOLUTION

government, and many of them inspired movements that changed the country.

Later, I will discuss these policies and political ideas and the way they moved history, but I want to make some observations at the outset about some broader patterns in the debate.

If you look at the two lists in terms of the timing of all these events, what first jumps out at you is the way that big changes seem to be all bunched together: six of the items mentioned on the two lists occurred in the 1776–1800 period; four in the 1860s and the 1870s; three in the period around the turn of the century, in the late 1800s and early 1900s; and six in the 1960s and early 1970s. That's nineteen out of twenty-one of the biggest change moments in American history concentrated together in four decades or, at most, four generations. Add in all of the huge changes resulting from the New Deal and World War II, and that's little more than five decades in which almost all of the biggest changes in American political history happened.

There are lots of theories about this concentration of change. Several scholars, including the brilliant historians Arthur Schlesinger Sr. and Jr., explain it via a “cycles of history” hypothesis: that periods of big change happen when demand for it gets pent up due to periods of slow change, and the slow change periods occur because people get exhausted during the big change period. Some historians have suggested a cyclical generational impulse, where one generation's lethargy or ambition causes a reaction from the next generation to do essentially the opposite.

I think these cyclical theories have some merit, but I also believe that they tend to discount how the ideas of major leaders or the activities and the fervor of an important movement cause ripples that make or allow other things to happen. There is absolutely no question, for example, that the energy, creativity, passion, and ideas of the civil rights movement inspired the women's, environmental, antiwar, and other progressive movements of the 1960s and 1970s. There is little doubt that the way Lincoln reframed the idea of America through the Gettysburg Address helped set the stage for the debate that culminated in the remarkable 14th and 15th

Amendments to the Constitution, which have become the legal basis for most of the great advances in civil rights and civil liberties in the modern era. Without Tom Paine's clarion call in *Common Sense*, the delegates to the Continental Congress who met later in that fateful year of 1776 probably would not have voted to declare independence, and Jefferson would not have written the Declaration of Independence. Nor would the Bill of Rights have been so politically urgent for the Federalists to pass fourteen years after that, without Paine and Jefferson's partnership in creating the idea of American freedom as fundamental to its nature. And absent the populist revolt against the conservative corporate domination of the American government in the post-Civil War era, neither the reforms of the progressive movement early in the twentieth century nor the revolution of the New Deal two generations later would have happened.

Ideas and movements beget more ideas and other movements. And that's an essential part of what causes change in this country.

Complications

When you make the kind of sweeping arguments that I am making about how the big debates continue throughout our entire history, you have to be wary of oversimplifying things, so let me get some caveats out of the way.

First, I want to make clear that there are excesses to American progressivism, and there are honorable things about American conservatism. For example, I personally have a great regard for tradition. I am a traditional fellow myself when it comes to family traditions and some church and political customs. And I think there are good things to be said about fiscal conservatism and being careful with tax dollars. I feel that we need to be careful about making change too fast and to be wary of unintended consequences. I also believe, as Ralph Waldo Emerson put it, that "reform in its antagonism inclines to asinine resistance, to kick with hooves; it runs to egotism and bloated self-conceit; it runs to a bottomless pretension, to unnatural refining and elevation, which ends in hypocrisy

12 THE PROGRESSIVE REVOLUTION

and sensual reaction.” American progressivism has sometimes led to excesses. Government bureaucracies can get bloated and can take shape in ways that don’t work well. People who think that they can remake the world anew in their idealism sometimes do make mistakes.

Both sides have their good points, and both sides have their flaws. My own view, though, is that I would rather take the problems of progressivism than the problems of conservatism because conservative principles are all too easily used to defend traditions that are actually rotten to the core and to shore up corruption, greed, and oppression. When conservatives defended slavery and Jim Crow, that was evil. When conservatives object to civil liberties because they might hurt the defense of the country, that is wrong. When conservatives stand up for greedy corporations that are hurting their workers and the environment and are denying health care to the sick, that is corrupt. The kinds of excesses bred by conservatism are far more dangerous and lead far more easily to corruption than do the kind of excesses that may arise from progressivism.

I will take progressivism’s potential weaknesses—bureaucracies that sometimes get bloated, the unintended consequences of changing things too fast, the pretension and egotism that sometimes accompany trying to remake the world anew, the fact that “undeserving people” sometimes get government benefits—over conservatism’s problems any day of the week.

Another caveat that it is important to acknowledge is the problem, mentioned earlier, that many of our political leaders were quite progressive in some arenas and awful or neglectful in other, very important, ones. This has been especially true with issues of race. Some of the great progressive statesmen who helped create our nation—most notably Thomas Jefferson—were slave owners. As I wrote in the introduction, Andrew Jackson and Woodrow Wilson had much to speak for them, especially in the realm of economic progressivism that truly helped the working class in this country, but they were both simply shameful on race issues. Teddy Roosevelt’s era of domestic progressive reforms was outstanding on many different levels, but he continued and

THE BIG CHANGE MOMENTS 13

expanded on McKinley's imperialist policies, which had terrible long-term consequences in terms of the precedents he set. Far too many progressive leaders over the course of our country's history did nothing to stop the terrible treatment of American Indians.

Even great political parties and movements themselves frequently became a stew of good and bad ideas. The pro-working class Jacksonian Democrats became mired in the slavery issue and continued on this destructive course for more than 130 years, until the civil rights movement finally sundered forever the alliance between white Southern racists and Northern progressives. The Republican reform movement of Lincoln, Charles Sumner, and Frederick Douglass got entangled with the corrupting influence of Northern industrialists and lost its way. The abolitionist and early feminist movements, which were united in complete solidarity throughout the 1840s, 1850s, and early 1860s, were broken apart by the political deal-making of the post-Civil War period and, once broken apart, have never truly been reunified (note the bitterness in some of the discourse between Hillary Rodham Clinton and Barack Obama during the 2008 Democratic primary elections).

These contradictions have frequently made progress uneven or created an opportunity for conservatives to divide and conquer people who should have been standing in solidarity.

My third caveat is that although times and political and economic systems have changed, both conservatives and progressives may quote the same historic leaders to fuel their debates. Conservatives, for example, enjoy quoting Jefferson and Paine to support their belief in a small government. But, as I explain in the next chapter, Paine and Jefferson lived in very different economic and political times. They had watched in horror as King George and then Alexander Hamilton used a powerful central government to benefit the big bankers and manufacturers, rather than the small farmers and workers whom Paine and Jefferson cared about. Given whom they fought for their entire careers, they would have clearly been outraged at modern big business and would have wanted to use the federal government to restrain it.

14 THE PROGRESSIVE REVOLUTION

So, how do we draw the lines in comparing thinkers such as Paine, Jefferson, and Hamilton to modern-day progressives and conservatives? It goes back to those fundamental definitions that I discussed in this book's introduction: conservatives believe in adhering to tradition, empowering elites, and championing individualism; progressives believe in political and economic equality for all and in a strong community and mutuality. By those definitions, Paine and Jefferson were clearly progressive, and Adams and Hamilton, for all of their important contributions to the nation's founding, were classic conservatives. The fact that different economic and political moments in history sometimes lend themselves to confusing rhetoric should not obscure those basic alignments. I will discuss all of this further in chapter 2.

These complications and disappointments sometime make messy attempts to suggest that the battle lines between progressives and conservatives have always been consistent, clean, or clearly defined. I still believe, however, that despite this complexity, the broad outline of progressive versus conservative thinking remains strong and clear from the vantage point of history. And the progressive movement, the movement that has pushed for political equality and economic justice, for a sense of community and mutuality, as opposed to the individual's selfish rights to exploit his fellow citizens, has continued to press for positive change that has made the United States a far better country.

The Implications of History and Our Current Political Debate

Those who don't study history, as the classic George Santayana quote goes, are condemned to repeat it. It is important to understand the echoes of all those past battles to engage effectively in the debates of our times.

When you hear a politician talk about states' rights and how the federal government should not involve itself in local issues, you hear the echoes of John C. Calhoun in the 1830s denouncing the federal government and defending states' rights; you hear the

THE BIG CHANGE MOMENTS 15

Southerners, a generation after Calhoun, who seceded from the union and then violently opposed a federal role in civil rights; and you hear the arguments of the segregationists who opposed civil rights all the way through the 1960s.

When politicians or media figures such as Lou Dobbs condemn immigration reform, you can recognize them as modern versions of politicians from the 1800s who wanted to deny citizenship and voting rights to working-class Catholic immigrants from Europe. Dobbs evokes the Know-Nothing Party's hatred of new immigrants in the 1850s. He echoes the Southerners who fought against civil rights and voting rights in the 1860s by arguing that the law might also make the Chinese "Coolies" in California eligible to vote. He is following in the footsteps of the 1920s politicians who carefully imposed quotas to keep certain immigrants from coming to this country.

When Rush Limbaugh mocks "feminazis" or calls Barack Obama "Barack the Magic Negro," you can hear the derisive echoes of two hundred years of conservatism making fun of the idea of equal rights for women and minorities.

When you see politicians worshipping at the altar of free enterprise or spinning out their supply-side theories of how giving tax cuts to millionaires will help the whole economy, you can imagine the Social Darwinists of the 1880s and the economic royalists who hated FDR's New Deal.

When telecommunications lobbyists explain to you why they should be able to determine which content on the Internet gets the easiest and fastest access, you can consider them incarnations of the railroad lobbyists in the late 1800s and early 1900s who rationalized why railroads should be able to discriminate against carrying the freight of certain consumers whom they didn't like.

And when you hear the voices of progressives calling out for equal rights and more power for working people and an economic system where the wealth is not all concentrated at the top, you can hear the roar of a long line of leaders from Tom Paine and Thomas Jefferson, through the abolitionists, the early feminists, and the early labor leaders; through Abe Lincoln and the Radical

16 THE PROGRESSIVE REVOLUTION

Republicans; through the populist and progressive movements of the late 1800s and early 1900s; and through FDR, Truman, John L. Lewis, Walter Reuther, and Martin Luther King Jr.

These are historical debates: Do we make progress, or do we keep things the way they are? Do we support more equality and more civil rights and more voting rights for more people, or not? Do we help our neighbors survive hard times, or do we look out only for ourselves? Do we provide a strong public education for all of our children, or not? What's most important: preserving our environment for future generations, or letting big business extract the maximum possible profit? Giving workers a decent wage or letting business pay those workers whatever it wants to pay them?

These are the questions that come up again and again, generation after generation, in American history. They are the questions our generation must answer as well, and our children and grandchildren will need to address the same issues. It is my contention that when we answer these questions one way, America moves forward and becomes a better country. When we answer them the other way, we make mistakes that send us backward as a nation. That's the way it once was and the way it will always be.