

Townhall

September 20, 2007

TOWNHALL.COM

Liberals Are Now Progressives (Again)

By Matt A. Mayer

When Hillary Clinton recently discarded the term liberal for the term progressive, it reminded me of the famous question of whether a leopard could change its spots? The answer, of course, is no. A leopard is genetically a leopard as a liberal is philosophically a liberal whether she is called a liberal or not.

Nonetheless, it is important to know what a progressive is since that is now the preferred term of the left. It comes from the Progressive Era. One of its intellectual and political leaders was President Woodrow Wilson. The Progressive Movement's chief aim was to centralize power by eliminating those pesky little concepts of separation of powers and checks and balances and escape the confines of a fixed constitution so that America could progress (not that it hadn't up to that point as evidenced by the abolishment of slavery and its rise as a world power).

Wilson despised those constitutional mechanisms because they prevented government from "proceeding" in accordance with the will of "an outside master." Wilson believed that the Constitution should be a living document. As Wilson stated: "All that progressives ask or desire is permission to interpret the Constitution according to the Darwinian principle." The outside master, then, was the fittest among us whose societal beliefs could be inserted into the constitution. Wilson thought certain men were able to "embody the projected consciousness of their time and people" and that these men whose "thought[s] run forward apace into regions whither the race is advancing" would master progress.

Wilson, of course, considered himself such a master. As Georges Clemenceau remarked about Wilson at Versailles, "He thinks he is another Jesus Christ come upon the Earth to reform men."

Not surprisingly, the Progressive Movement's adherence to Darwinism gave birth to eugenics. Margaret Sanger, the founder of Planned Parenthood and a leader of the eugenics movement, advocated for a "stern and rigid policy of sterilization and segregation to that grade of population whose progeny is already tainted or whose inheritance is such that objectionable traits may be transmitted to offspring." In 1927, the U.S. Supreme Court upheld a law permitting forced sterilization in which Oliver Wendell Holmes proclaimed: "Three generations of imbeciles are enough." The culmination of eugenics was the rise of Nazism in Germany and the Holocaust.

This dark side of the Progressive Era, thankfully, came to an end. Its belief that there are those among us who know better and shouldn't be constrained by a fixed Constitution and

limited government, unfortunately, did not. To escape the baggage of the term progressives, they started calling themselves liberals. Today's liberals, like yesterday's progressives, believe wholeheartedly that the answer to all of society's problems lies in the use of government by enlightened leaders to effectuate progress and view constitutional constraints as archaic and quaint.

The aim of the Progressive Movement succeeded as it gave birth to the rise of the administrative state and the consolidation of power in Washington during the New Deal and Great Society periods where many new rights and federal powers were suddenly found into the Constitution. This couldn't have happened had the progressives not succeeded in amending the Constitution in 1913 first to provide for a source of funding the administrative state (the federal income tax via the 16th Amendment) and then to eliminate any check the states had on the power in Washington (electing senators by popular vote instead of by state legislatures via the 17th Amendment). When states lost their ability to reign-in recalcitrant senators with threats to appoint someone else after his term ended if they voted to expand federal power or push costs to the states, the principle of federalism suffered a horrible blow. Given the failure over the last thirty years to reduce the power in Washington, that blow may have been deadly.

While no reasonable person would claim that Hillary Clinton is a dark side progressive, the danger of the progressive-liberal beliefs in a living constitution and the idea that they know better than the rest of us is that the distinction between forced sterilization and universal healthcare rests solely on the degree of government coercion used to achieve the end and the wishes of five justices to see it happen. When politicians are unconstrained by a fixed constitution and checks and balances, we better hope their idea of progress is the right one.

Matt A. Mayer is President of Opportunity Ohio.