

The two parties which divide the state, the party of conservatism and that of innovation are very old, and have disputed the world ever since it was made. Now one, now the other gets the day, and still the fight renews itself as if for the first time, under new names and hot personalities.

-Ralph Waldo Emerson

It is the contention of this book that American history consists of one long battle between the forces of reaction and the defense of wealth and power, on the one hand, and the forces of progressivism and community, on the other.

If you look at our country's long history, from the days of the first stirrings of our revolutionary impulses against Britain to today, progressive leaders and progressive movements have moved this country forward in the face of bitter—and frequently violent—opposition from reactionaries and defenders of the status quo. Consider the major advances in American history:

- The American Revolution
- The Bill of Rights and the forging of a democracy
- Universal white male suffrage
- Public education
- The emancipation of the slaves
- The national park system
- Food safety
- The breakup of monopolies
- The Homestead Act
- Land grant universities
- Rural electrification
- Women's suffrage
- The abolition of child labor
- The eight hour workday
- The minimum wage
- Social Security
- Civil rights for minorities and women
- Voting rights for minorities and the poor
- Cleaning up our air, our water, and toxic dump sites
- Consumer product safety
- Medicare and Medicaid

Every single one of those reforms, which are literally the reforms that made this country what it is today, was accomplished by the progressive movement standing up to the fierce opposition of conservative reactionaries who were trying to preserve their own power. American history is one long argument between progressivism and conservatism.

The striking thing about this long debate is how much the arguments that have occurred are repetitive over time, in terms of their rhetoric, constituencies, philosophy, and the values they represent. From generation to generation, the conservatives who

oppose reform and progress have used the same kinds of arguments over and over again. Arthur Schlesinger Jr. described the division as one between “public purpose and private interest.” If you sketch out the broad lines of the conservative case against the progressive case, it flows something like this:

### **The Conservative Argument**

Successful businessmen and their allies make America great, and we should not undermine their authority or cost them money because that will mean bad things for the economy and all of us. Their freedom to run things as they like benefits everyone in the long run. And they should be the ones who control the government as well, because they know how the world works, and we can trust them to protect our national interests because of their knowledge and wisdom. An excess of democracy is a dangerous thing.

We must adhere to tradition because once we tamper with tradition, society goes to hell. It’s a scary world out there, and the people who have always run things can protect us, but only if we stay with our traditions and keep things the way they have always been. People who are different from us create problems, and we don’t want our traditions or the carefully built structure of our society undermined.

If people are poor, it’s probably their own fault because they are too lazy to work, didn’t study in school, and are generally bad people. Society shouldn’t spend any money on helping people who can’t help themselves, and we can’t afford it anyway. Ultimately, each of us is responsible for ourselves in the world, and we shouldn’t be relying on government or anybody else to make it.

We should fear change and be wary of hope because when things change, we just don’t know what the unintended consequences will be.

### **The Progressive Argument**

We are all created equal and deserve both equal rights under the law and equal opportunities to make good lives for ourselves and families. That means that the laws should not be formulated to favor one race of people or to help the wealthy over the poor. And it means that we all should have a good education, enough food to eat, adequate health care if we get sick, and a decent place to live.

Our society works well only when it has a sense of community, an understanding that we are all interdependent on one another, that we are all diminished if any one of us is suffering, and that we look out for those who can’t take care of themselves.

America is a democracy that should be a government of, by, and for the people. We don’t trust elites to look out for the rest of us, and we want everyone to have a say in how the government and the economy are run.

### **Fear and Hope**

The arguments by conservatives all too frequently invoke fear—of change, of one another, of foreigners and foreign enemies, or of certain people. They proclaim a loud and fervent patriotism and a love of traditional values, quite often quoting the Bible to justify their point of view, while ignoring those patriots and Bible quotes that don't fit their agenda.

Progressives, on the other hand, have called for hope, rather than fear, and for changing things for the better, rather than just leaving things the way they have always been. We have been for more power for regular folks and less power for elites. And we have been for a stronger sense of community, rather than the sense that each of us is on his or her own.

The central theme of this book is to show how these political arguments have been repeated over time and time again since the American Revolution, how the same alternative visions of America keep being argued over and over, and how when progressives have won the day politically, the country has moved forward.

The good news is that a more progressive vision of what America can aspire to has prevailed enough times over the years to make us a far better country. While it is certainly true that the United States is more conservative by many measures than the industrialized countries in Europe, and that progress has been uneven and painfully slow, we are also the country that invented the modern notions of democracy and equality, and that legacy has echoed down through the generations and inspired new movements to make their claims on the American dream.

American history has always been a mixed bag, with vision and courage and progress mixed together with slavery, the brutal killing of many millions of American Indians, wars shouldn't have fought, and altogether too much greed. There have been plenty of times when the progressive movement was too weak and small to stop bad things from happening, or when it settled for compromises on fundamental issues, such as slavery and women's suffrage.

Even leaders who pushed for progressive policy in some areas failed us in others. As I discuss more in chapter 4, this is especially true in terms of the way otherwise progressive leaders, such as Jefferson, Jackson, Wilson, and FDR, have failed us on racial justice issues. But it applies to other leaders as well. For example, Teddy Roosevelt created the national park system, partially broke apart the big trusts, and brought us some measure of food safety, but he had no use for unions or women's suffrage, allowed some of the worst lynchings in the nation's history to occur in the south, and was a military adventurer. Woodrow Wilson brought us the single most important economic reform in the country's history—a progressive income tax—and his ideas set the stage for many New Deal-era reforms and the United Nation, but he got us into a stupid, wasteful war that we had no business being in. Kennedy and Johnson helped push through civil rights laws, Medicare, and Medicaid, but got us into the Vietnam War.

Yet even with all of the disappointments that are part of America's history, we also know that the progressive arguments and movements have prevailed again and again and have created democracy where progress is always possible. Movement leaders such as Tom Paine, Frederick Douglass, Sojourner Truth, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, John L. Lewis, Walter Reuther, Martin Luther King Jr., Cesar Chavez, and Rachel Carson have always been ahead of the politicians and have pushed our country to become better. Our history is full of progressive leaders fighting the good fight, and winning much of the time, to create a better nation. The battle between conservatism and progress will continue to be fought as long as there is a United States of America.