

## THE AMERICAN COLLECTIVIST MYTH: ITS ROOTS, ITS RESULTS, ITS DOWNFALL

By George C. Roche III

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There have been decisive moments in our history, formative periods with a potent influence on our national character. The period of the Revolutionary War and our subsequent founding as a nation was one such period. It was then that the Founding Fathers charted our national path toward limited government, the dignity of free men, and the marvelous prosperity we have enjoyed in this country. It is my contention that the early twentieth century was another such formative period. Unfortunately, the path charted in the early years of this



century favored the collective over the individual, re-directing America on an increasingly hazardous path as the century progressed. I also believe that the American people are now entering yet another critical moment which will have a profound effect on our future. The fate of our nation hangs in the balance, depending upon how that critical moment will be decided.

To make clear what I have in mind, I should like to produce a sort of balance sheet on twentieth-century American civilization. To evaluate the century as a whole, we will be looking back over the eight decades already behind us, and forward, over the 20 years or so that remain until the year 2000.

Surveying human history in this broad sweep, like photographing the earth from a satellite, we find that certain dominant features become obvious. These dominant features, because of their size, are often less

im•pri•mis (im•pri•mis) adv. In the first place. Middle English, from Latin in primis, among the first (things)....

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clear in our ant's-eye view of life lived day by day, year by year.

From this 80-year perspective no feature stands out more starkly and unarguably than the grim fact that decade by decade since 1900 life in America has become more and more collectively organized at an ever-accelerating pace. Worse yet, the period of increasing collectivization has also been a period of increasing disorder. Yet, as society's problems become more and more severe, the dominant voices have only shouted louder and louder for collective solutions, and grown more and more suspicious of anyone who suggested that collective measures might actually be causing social dislocations rather than correcting them.

Now, finally, there are signs that a corner of some kind may have been turned. Freedom and the individual are making themselves heard again. The collectivist consensus indeed is breaking up, but no one can yet say what new system of ideas will replace it in coming decades.

At this point it is just too early to predict very far ahead. One presidential election does not make an era, and in fact some observers claim to see the so-called "Reagan revolution" already losing its internal drive, its opponents already showing renewed vitality, only a few months after the new administration has taken office.

For the short run, we are in a period of extraordinary flux, upheaval, and realignment as regards the dominant ideas around which our national life is organized. During the 1980s all of us here will play a part in the creation of a new myth for America's third century.

By "myth" I do not mean an illusion, fairy tale, or denial of reality. On the contrary, "myth" in its highest sense means a very real and powerful governing idea which commands the willing, active assent of a whole society. As Russell Kirk has written, "A myth is a poetic representation of a hidden reality...[a] means of penetrating the truth by appealing to the moral imagination."

The dominant idea of twentieth-century American civilization to date has been what I would call the American collectivist myth. The American collectivist myth holds that human wellbeing is best achieved by subordinating the free individual to the planned social collectivity within ever larger and more intricately complex organizational systems. Not an intentional falsehood or a deliberately bad idea at the outset, the collectivist myth has nonetheless run up a mounting list of disastrous consequences which we now see all around us—the runaway growth of the modern state, the loss of unifying moral and spiritual values, the stagnation of economic vitality, the erosion of security at home and abroad, the corruption of culture, the antagonism of group against group, and the widespread loss of individual identity, dignity, initiative, and purpose among ordinary Americans everywhere.

## Sources misunderstood

Most people now recognize that the American collectivist myth is dying or virtually dead. But if you asked them where the myth came from in the first place, most would make two common mistakes. One, they would date the rise of collectivism from the New Deal era of the 1930s. And two, they would attribute the driving force of collectivism to politicians like Franklin Roosevelt, Hubert Humphrey, Lyndon Johnson, and others in the Democratic Party or liberal Republican Party tradition, right down to our own time of Ted Kennedy, Walter Mondale, John Anderson, and Tom Hayden.

No one who buys these two key misconceptions about the old era is in a position to exert much significant influence in shaping the new era. Thus it is vital that we understand that the American collectivist myth actually had its beginnings not with FDR's election in 1932, but a whole generation earlier, right at the turn of the twentieth century, and that its decisive momentum was imparted not by public figures but by little-known men of ideas whose names not one in hundred Americans would recognize in their day or in ours.

The plot of this story can be quickly told: Late in the 19th century, as America's industries boomed and immigrants poured in and cities mushroomed, it began to seem to some people that the very scale of life itself had so increased that it threatened to change beyond recognition the rules by which the common man had always felt he could earn a fair chance to get ahead in the world.

In certain elite circles, it began to be asked whether the answers for America's growing pains might not lie elsewhere than in the common sense of the Founding Fathers and the tested traditions of the Judaeo-Christian Scriptures—whether those answers might not instead be found in the work of certain daring European thinkers whose ideas had rocked the Old World during the middle and later 1800s: thinkers like Marx with his new theories of production and the state, Darwin with his startling account of a creation that needed no Creator, Freud with his maps of man's mind and soul looking more like a jungle than an orderly, obedient machine.

So it was that a relative handful of professors and intellectuals, writing in the first years of this century and drawing on iconoclastic theories that were already well-advanced in Europe, brought those ideas to America and began a process that remade the face of American society within thirty years. These collectivist ideas spread from a few seminal thinkers, to the second- and third-hand purveyors of ideas inside and outside the academy, reaching the professors, the secondary and elementary school teachers, the ministers, the working press—the word wielders. The collective mentality continued to spread, reaching the professions, the business community, the courts, the novelists, the artists, the general public and last—always last—the politicians.



Follow the dominant intellectual currents of 1900-1930, I am saying, and you will see the dominant political movements of 1930-1980. Here is living proof of Richard Weaver's famous phrase, "Ideas have consequences"—consequences which in this case have not been happy.

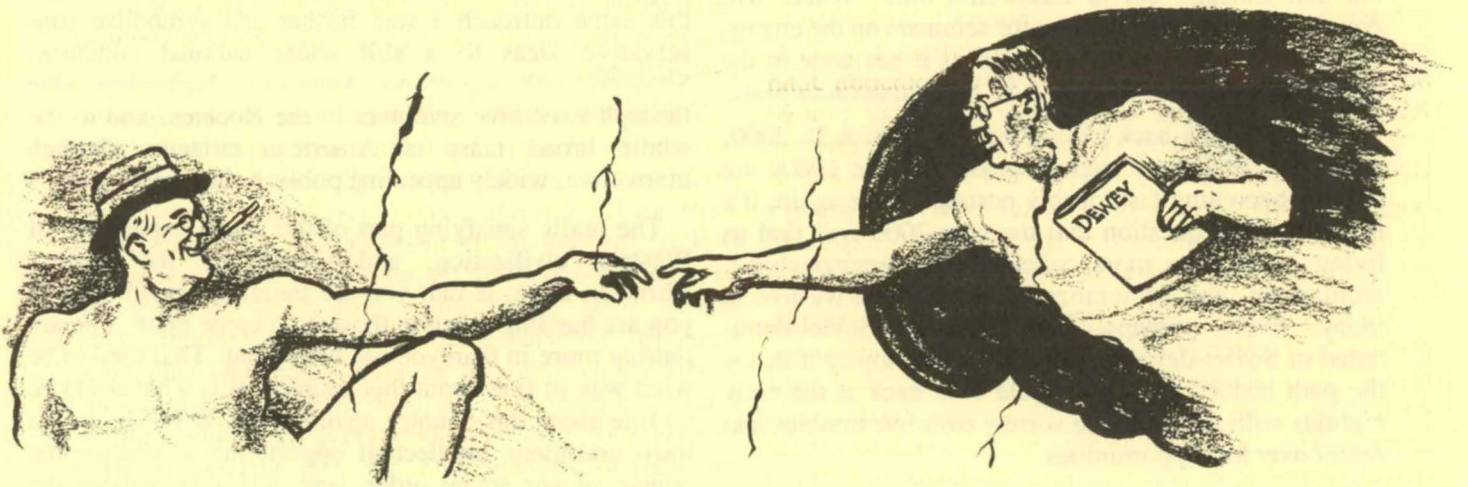
No better example of this century's early seminal thinkers could be chosen than John Dewey, who had a lasting impact in philosophy, education, art, and ultimately government. Dewey's progressive school experiment of the mid-1890's at the University of Chicago became a widespread movement throughout the world. He advocated a system of education which would produce a new generation of Americans, Americans with a

religion" to be derived from human experience and relationships.

Finally, listen to John Dewey's astounding blank check for state coercion in pursuit of social goals, from one of his books published in 1916:

Whether [the use of force] is justifiable or not... is, in substance, a question of efficiency (including economy) of means in the accomplishing of ends;... The criterion of value lies in the relative efficiency and economy of the expenditure of force as a means to an end.

This is the man whose ideas, more than those of any other thinker, have shaped the course of American



preference for group and social activity, who viewed themselves not as individuals but as members of a "total democratic society."

The new American was to be guided by the attempt to live in harmony with social processes. No individual values were to interfere with that social harmony. This relativist evaluation of the individual had its roots in the pragmatic philosophy which John Dewey had borrowed from William James, a philosophy that removed all fixed values and guidelines by which the individual might define himself and his goals.

### Blank check for coercion

Dewey emphasized the unfinished nature of society and the universe. He insisted that man could mold his society. In Dewey's conception of an evolutionary philosophy, man could dominate the process through the role of the human mind. Nothing was to stand in the way. In his 1922 book *Human Nature and Conduct*, Dewey urged a naturalistic approach to ethics. He ruled out all supernatural values and again insisted that "experimental method" was the keystone of the new order. No value, even in religion, could thus be accepted if it did not benefit society according to the judgment of the Deweyite priesthood. Dewey called for "a new kind of

public education in this century, which in turn has done so much to shape the minds and characters of decision-makers in all walks of life these past 80 years. Is the plot of our story beginning to come into focus?

Meanwhile, Dewey's colleagues at Columbia University were busy on other fronts. Anthropologist Ruth Benedict and her mentor Franz Boas were developing the idea that man could be understood only as a social animal, since his character was the exclusive creation of his society and environment. Boas and Benedict urged "enlightened" societies to abandon outmoded faith in individual character and the teachings of the Western tradition. All cultures and all standards of behavior were henceforth to be viewed as equal.

The historians of these decades were not far behind in their advocacy of the new social ideal. Frederick Jackson Turner's book *The Significance of the Frontier in American History* has had an enormous influence upon the last several generations of Americans, who learned from it that the old days of limitless opportunity were gone forever with the frontier, replaced by gigantic corporate structures and an oppressive urban society.

Charles A. Beard's *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution* was another key turning point. Beard set



aside the traditional ideals of American society in favor of an essentially Marxian philosophy of history. He read the fears and prejudices of 1900 backward through American history, creating the impression of a brutal and exploitive past in which the Founding Fathers had cynically placed the economic welfare of a few ahead of the total social welfare of all.

If Columbia was one important seedbed of the collectivist myth during the teens and twenties, the University of Chicago was rapidly becoming another. The political theories of Chicago's Harold Lasswell, for example, portrayed society as irrational, insisting that only centralized political coercion could provide truly rational direction for the social order.

As rapidly as the scholars spun their theories, an emerging new breed of social engineers was on hand to translate the collective myth into specifics. The flamboyant Thorstein Veblen, a sort of combination John Kenneth Galbraith and Ralph Nader in his day, poured out his bitter frustrations on the business community in shrill books like *The Theory of the Leisure Class*. Meanwhile, Veblen's fellow economists John R. Commons and Richard Ely pioneered in charting a vastly expanded role for organized labor in the new collectivity.

The social-engineering impulse knew no bounds. Sociologist Lester Frank Ward, one of the true patron saints of the modern American collectivist ideal, had written in 1893, "The individual has reigned long enough. The day has come for society to take its affairs into its own hands and shape its own destinies." Ward saw politics as a manipulating device designed to control all society, stating: "Modern society is suffering from the very opposite of paternalism—from under-government." In Ward, all those years ago, we thus find the original germ of an idea which has been central to the social planner's rhetoric from the New Deal right down to the present.

The growing and increasingly fashionable collectivist myth had its artistic side as well. Nearly every novel that enjoyed favorable critical attention among the intellectuals during these decades dealt with themes of alienation, repudiation of traditional values, and hostility toward capitalism and middle America.

### Revolution achieved

Even religion, which had once offered the most profound plea for individual liberty, felt the rising tide during these formative years of the first third of our century. Economic determinism increasingly dominated the churches. Clergymen began to turn from theological to social questions. In the new emphasis upon "total social goals," even salvation was now to be collectivized. Theologian Reinhold Niebuhr held pre-eminent influence in the field, and he epitomized the new mythology when he wrote in his 1932 book, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*: "...a sharp distinction must be drawn between the moral and social behavior of indi-

viduals and of social groups, national, racial, and economic; and...this distinction justifies and necessitates political policies which a purely individualistic ethic must always find embarrassing."

But to the intellectual community which was dominant in this country by that year, 1932, it was the individualistic ethic itself, together with the entire cultural, political, economic, social, artistic, and moral foundation on which it was based, that had become an embarrassment, one which they believed ought to be replaced as speedily as possible by the new collectivist ethic. Seen in this light, what could have been more natural than the election, in that same year, of the arch-collectivist and political pragmatist, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, as President of the United States? The intellectual revolutionaries had already done their work, and now they were about to become the new political establishment.

The results of this revolution were eloquently summarized by Walter Lippmann a few years later. "The premises of authoritarian collectivism," Lippmann wrote in *The Good Society*, "have become the working beliefs, the self-evident assumptions, the unquestioned axioms, not only of all the revolutionary regimes, but of nearly every effort which lays claim to being enlightened, humane, and progressive.... Throughout the world, in the name of progress, men who call themselves communists, socialists, fascists, nationalists, progressives, and even liberals, are unanimous in holding that government with its instruments of coercion must, by commanding the people how they shall live, direct the course of civilization and fix the shape of things to come."

Of course, there is nothing magical about 1900-1930. Some of the collectivist myth was already forming before the turn of the century, as for example in the work of Lester Ward. Some of the myth comes after 1930, as with New Deal "Brain Trusters" Rex Tugwell, Thurmond Arnold, and others. But the central fact remains that the body of thought which epitomized that thirty-year period has gone on to form the dominant pattern of American life for the balance of this century.

The continuity of this pattern is remarkable. Democrats or Republicans, boom or bust, war or peace, the pattern persists and reinforces itself.

In the first two decades of this century, then, it is clear that Theodore Roosevelt, a man of books as well as of the outdoors, and Woodrow Wilson, a Princeton professor of politics, were not really ideological adversaries but brothers under the skin. In their rhetoric and in their interventionist policies at home and abroad, both were builders of, and were in turn guided by, the myth of the omniscient state which was then in its rambunctious and optimistic early phases.

Likewise, it is clear that Wilson's ambitious enlargement of federal power in the early teens was not really



interrupted by the First World War, as some superficial readings of history would have it, but that it was actually accelerated and consolidated by the war experience, which introduced many new forms of centralization that either persisted into the peacetime twenties or were laid aside for a decade or so to re-emerge like Frankenstein under the New Deal.

Nor did the Harding-Coolidge-Hoover era that followed represent the pendulum swing away from collectivist trends that many suppose. Bigness burgeoned in every sector of American life, "business-government-partnership" became a cheery catch-phrase, and political manipulation of the economy ran rampant. That political manipulation of the economy was in fact the direct, clear-cut cause of the 1929 Crash and the subsequent Great Depression.

Nevertheless Franklin Roosevelt and the whole priesthood of collectivist mythmakers managed to stand the truth on its head and use the Depression as a pretext for a still further, and now really massive, collectivization of American society throughout the decade of the 1930s, still without ever curing the Depression. Only World War II did that, and following the war the social engineers stood ready with further collectivist gimmicks such as the Full Employment Act of 1946.

There was steady pressure throughout the Truman years for major expansion of the federal role in health, in education, and in welfare—pressure that finally got its way under the succeeding Republican President, Dwight D. Eisenhower. Thus Eisenhower proved once again that Republican Administrations usually ratify rather than reverse the collectivist inroads of their Democratic predecessors. Indeed, we find Republicans sometimes even accelerating those inroads, as with Ike's disastrous appointment of Earl Warren as Chief Justice, which opened an era of Deweyite pragmatic jurisprudence whose damage is still visible all around us.

The same pattern of ratification and acceleration was repeated two decades later when the Nixon and Ford Administrations helped consolidate most of Lyndon Johnson's Great Society programs, exacerbated the oil crisis and other economic woes through an unprecedented program of peacetime wage and price controls, and presided over the regulatory explosion of the early 1970s.

### **How decisive was 1980?**

None of this is meant to cast personal aspersions on specific Presidents of either party, or on the generally sincere and able executives, legislators, and judges who have served with them in government down through the eight decades of the collectivist era. I am simply identifying a pattern of political continuity, a kind of inertial momentum in the policy process, which is virtually inevitable once the reigning myth is in place and as long as it remains in place.

This point brings me up to the present day on our twentieth century timeline, and it turns our attention to the final point in my title, "The American Collectivist Myth: Its Roots, Its Results, Its Downfall." The downfall has happened; that much is obvious. The reigning myth of the past 50 years, indeed the past 80 years, is very definitely no longer in place.

This means that in the 1980s we can expect, at the very least, a significant departure by all three branches of the federal government, as well as by state and local governments, from the collectivist ratification pattern of past Republican interludes. President Reagan and his allies on Capitol Hill have already begun an assault on statist sacred cows more determined than anything Washington has ever witnessed in the entire modern era.

Whether we can also expect, in this decade and the next one, a decisive emergence of conservative personalities and policies as the new American political establishment is something else again, however. That depends, I state once again, not on Reagan's charm or the misery index or the Middle East or the Gallup poll, but on the underlying infrastructure of ideas slowly taking on its new outline and coloration in minds of mythmakers and opinion leaders and ordinary citizens across this land. The four key questions are these:

(1) How was the collectivist myth dethroned? We cannot frame a serious answer in terms of Goldwater and Wallace and the Sunbelt and Proposition 13 and other surface phenomena. We have to look deeper to see the new ideas, the emerging counter-myths, if you will, that made such phenomena possible. We have to track those ideas from their first appearance a decade or two ago up into the present, the early 1980s; measure their present strength; and take stock of who is now championing them, where, and how.

(2) Is the collectivist myth not only dethroned but actually dying? Again, our answer must go deeper than mere form charts for the 1982 or 1984 elections. We must survey the intellectual battleground even more closely than the political one, assess our opportunities, and reckon with the many powerful opinion-molding strongholds collectivism still controls in the mass media, popular culture, education, religion, and even corporate boardrooms.

(3) What ideas, attitudes, and perceptions of social reality are now emerging and converging with the kind of growing momentum and popular appeal that would mark them as likely to build toward a position of dominance in the American mind by the year 2000? Having identified those ideas, what do we think of them? Many are the same old tired panaceas in fresh new futurist packages. But some, I believe, are solid, promising hybrids of the timeless truths and the newest perceptions of man's ever-searching mind and spirit. Which ones are they, and how are they doing? What can we do to advance them?



## Seedtime again

(4) Finally, having identified the ideas we hope will become America's new consensus, we must pinpoint the specific practical channels through which those concepts are being or could be disseminated abroad into widespread intellectual and cultural acceptance as the myth-generating seedtime of the three opening decades of this century repeats itself in the two closing decades. Who, we should ask, are the John Deweys and Lester Wards of contemporary social science? Who are the Herbert Crolys and H. L. Menckens of contemporary journalism? In popular culture, who will tell this age how it feels as novelist Upton Sinclair and F. Scott Fitzgerald told the early collectivist age? In scholarship and research, which institutions will prove seminal as Columbia and Chicago did in Lasswell's time? Where will America's leadership elite go for seminars on the emerging national ideas of the eighties, as it has gone to the Aspen Institute, Brookings, and Esalen in decades past?

When we look back toward our day from A.D. 2000, when the 1990s are slightly passé and the 1980s are already becoming fashionably nostalgic once again, it's not out of the question that the year 2000 will find us living in an even more collectivized, depersonalized, secularized, and demoralized America than we live in today. Even, perhaps—God forbid—a Soviet-dominated or Soviet-devastated America. Obviously if that is the path history takes we would look back at the early eighties with considerable sorrow over our troubles and regret over lost opportunities.

But I honestly do not believe that is the path America will take in these fast-approaching final decades of the twentieth century since Christ. Such times of mental and spiritual flux as we are now experiencing have led, at certain other points in American history, not into collectivism and disappointment but into what Lincoln called "a new birth of freedom" for "this nation, under God." That is the future we can have, once we understand that ideas have consequences, for no one and nothing can deprive us of the individual freedom to choose our own ideas and the individual courage to act

upon those ideas at whatever price. If enough of us are awake to that freedom and alive with that courage, noble myths and grand realities must surely be the consequence.

This intelligent choosing of ideas, this competency in acting on the ideas chosen, is precisely what we intend at Hillsdale College. It is our goal in the undergraduate education that Hillsdale offers to the future leaders who will have such an impact on tomorrow's world. It is our purpose in Hillsdale's national outreach through the Center for Constructive Alternatives, the Ludwig von Mises Lectures, the Hillsdale College Press, and the monthly journal *Imprimis*.

And in its new Shavano Institute for National Leadership, based in Colorado, Hillsdale now hopes to take this same outreach a step further and symbolize conservative ideas to a still wider national audience. Shavano will speak to America's leadership elite through executive seminars in the Rockies, and to the whole broad mass of American citizenry through innovative, widely appealing public policy television.

The really satisfying part of the whole experience of Western civilization, and specifically the Judaeo-Christian ethic, is that you are building something that you are handing down to those who come after. You are putting more in than you are taking out. That used to be what was so fine about this country. It is what could be so fine about this country again. We have before us the most enormous intellectual opportunity to change the course of our social order, and with that perhaps the course of the world. We have it right in our hands to do something about it.

We must do it not simply for ourselves but for our children, our grandchildren, and their grandchildren. If we do any less we will get exactly what we deserve. But if we meet our responsibilities, I am convinced our cause will prevail, because the truth finally will out. We happen to be present at a point in time when being armed with that truth is the most important single tool in the world. I commend you to your task.