The Progressive Take-over

The New Orthodoxy

CLARENCE B. CARSON

YESTERDAY'S INNOVATION has become today's orthodoxy. Once proud innovators, or their intellectual descendants, have turned from original thought to the propagation of established "truths." This orthodoxy is difficult to detect because its advocates and adherents belong to a tradition of innovation, and even now they often speak as if they were in the vanguard of bold new thought. Actually, however, they might more aptly be described as riding the caboose on an old established line. They are the legatees of a reform movement which has had its reforms embodied in legislation, its ideas embraced by the high courts of the land, and its beliefs become grist for the mills of politicians. Kennedy's New Frontier might more correctly be called a sedate Middle-Aged Deal. The reform movement, whether it be called Progressivism, liberalism or reform Darwinism, has spent its energies, and its proponents have become defenders of a new status quo. A new orthodoxy now prevails in American thought.

The roots of this new orthodoxy lie back in the last third of the nineteenth century. At that time, reformism was a sickly seedling among the giant oaks of an old orthodoxy. Nevertheless, it sank its roots into the fertile soil of the discontent which abounded in the latter part of the nineteenth century in America. Among the discontented were the heavily mortgaged farmer, overproducing for a market in which prices were generally declining; the industrial worker, hard-hit by periodic depressions and barely holding his own in prosperous times; the immigrant, providing the surplus of workers and subsisting near the bottom of the socio-economic scale; the Negro, whose new found freedom had exposed him to new devices of exploitation. Almost any idea which promised an amelioration of circumstances or a bettering of conditions could attract believers, and did.
There were anarchists and socialists, green-backers and free-silverites, communitarians and communists, populists and laborites, offering their doctrines as solutions to the problems of the needy. Many seeds were sown, but only one gave rise to a plant which survived. That plant we can, for simplicity's sake, call Progressivism.

Progressivism, in its formative stage, was nurtured by the ideas and analyses of Henry George, Henry Demarest Lloyd, Richard Ely, Edward Bellamy and Thorstein Veblen. Their thought was founded upon an organic conception of society derived from Darwinism, a melioristic and utopian view of the future, and, for some of them, a social Christianity informed by the view that the Kingdom was to come on earth. These men believed that the social order was radically wrong, that injustice and evil were embodied in its very institutions. The society was founded upon competition, whereas co-operation was needed. It relied upon the motive of pecuniary gain, whereas service to others was the proper ideal. It attempted to place responsibilities upon the individual which should be borne by society. They hoped to accomplish their reforms by extending the suffrage, making the government sensitive to the popular will, and then using the government to institute reforms which would protect the general welfare and advance what they thought was the common good of all Americans. As Lester Frank Ward, the sociologist, said 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."

But these reformers were little more than voices crying in the wilderness at the beginning of the twentieth century. Reform had been turned back by the defeat of William Jennings Bryan in 1896, and the national government was securely conservative, presided over by William McKinley. Popular literature was politely innocuous in the waning years of Victorianism. Academic economics served the status quo, and Darwinism was used to buttress an individualism turned rugged. The courts acted as a bulwark against social change, resting their decisions upon a Constitution now made sacred by age and usage. Philosophers and preachers upheld the order on the grounds that it incarnated eternal verities. Protestants of Anglo-Saxon descent governed and occupied prestigious positions almost everywhere. The old orthodoxy appeared to be firmly entrenched and invulnerable to the occasional attack.

It is well to remember, even as we prepare to explore the evidence for the existence of a new orthodoxy, that ideas which now have widespread acceptance were once new and untried, that their exponents were bold reformers who attacked an established order, that they were preceded by keen-minded men who sought out the fallacies of the intellectual explanations of their day, and that the defenders of the then existing order considered them impractical wishful thinkers. That the old orthodoxy was undermined and eventually unseated was not simply the result of fortuitous circumstances; there were men and women who propagated ideas and championed reforms. There were preachers such as Washington Gladden and Walter Rauschenbusch, who taught a new Social Gospel; muckrakers such as Ida Tarbell and Lincoln Steffens, who exposed business manipulations and corruption in government; legislators such as Robert M. LaFollette and Oscar W. Underwood, who worked for reform, and Presidents Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson, who gave it national stature.

Despite the extension of the powers of the Interstate Commerce Commission, the passage of the Pure Food and Drug Act,
the income tax and direct election of Senators amendments to the Constitution, the victory over the old orthodoxy was not completed in the first fifteen years of the twentieth century. It took a world-wide depression to set the stage for that. World War I interrupted the reform surge, and the 1920's were the scene of a full scale reaction to social programs. The depression, however, provided an opportunity, Roosevelt the leadership, and intellectuals the ideas and programs for the establishment of a new order. The new order rested mainly on Progressive assumptions, somewhat modified by a depression-born pessimism about the future. Its leaders were pragmatic, relativistic and experimental. They believed that society should take its affairs into its hands through government, and that government action could and should alleviate suffering, bolster and resuscitate the economy, and provide the leadership for reviving and restoring America. The United States was a democracy, they said, and in a democracy government was the servant and instrument of the people. The ills of each became the problems of all, and positive governmental action was hailed as the solution. The New Deal fostered measures—regulation of the stock exchange, control and manipulation of gold, subsidies for agriculture, social security, minimum wages and hours—which so involved the government with American life that to extricate it has remained as too painful a possibility for most politicians to contemplate.

Just when Progressivism cum liberalism became an orthodoxy is difficult to determine. The election of Roosevelt to third and fourth terms, though occasioned by international crises, gave unprecedented popular sanctions to his programs. Truman’s upset victory in 1948 provided a further aura of permanence to reform programs. But it was probably the apparent acceptance of New and Fair Deal reforms by the Eisenhower administration which made earlier innovations into an orthodoxy. Opposition continued, but it no longer had a voice in national affairs.

The above is an outline presentation of the coming to power of men under the sway of new ideas, attitudes and beliefs, of reformers going from radical belligerency to the conservatism which follows years of power, of innovation transformed into orthodoxy. It places the new orthodoxy in its historical perspective, but it identifies the condition only broadly and leaves doubt as to the existence of any such orthodoxy. To pin down some of the attributes of this condition and to indicate that it exists will be the major burden of the rest of this essay.

The prevalence of an orthodoxy—a sociopolitical one—would mean that there is a generally accepted body of answers to questions, of solutions to problems, and of unquestioned assumptions. It would mean, in practice, that a grown man would know what these are without even thinking about them. Indeed, it is of the essence of an orthodoxy that such “thought” as occurs will confirm the prevailing assumptions and leave current practices undisturbed. It should not surprise us to discover that an orthodoxy would have its articles of faith, patron saints, rituals, mythology and invective.

The new orthodoxy begins with and proceeds upon an organic rather than an individualistic assumption of the nature of reality. It is equalitarian in that it assumes that all groups, races, peoples and societies are basically equal. Where inequities exist among such social organisms they are attributed to the environment. All undesirable conditions can be described as problems which can be solved by manipulations and reorderings of the environment.
within which men live. The technique can be appropriately, though unoriginally, called problem-solving.

The reader can test the degree of his orthodoxy by supplying the solutions for the following current problems. What is the solution to the problem of maintaining international peace? How can racial inequities be wiped out? What mode of attack should be made on juvenile delinquency? How is quality education to be provided for all American children? If artists and scholars are have-nots within our society, what should be done? If the rate of economic expansion has dwindled, how can it be revived? Where shall we turn to solve the problem of unemployment? When agricultural surpluses drive down the income of the farmer, how can he receive his proper share? How can racial prejudice be obliterated? What should be done to preserve the central importance of the individual within American society?

There is no need to make up answers to these and related questions. They have been provided for us in a work of some significance: The Report of the President’s Commission on National Goals, published as Goals for Americans. Since the commission was appointed by President Eisenhower and the report made to him, it should indicate the bi-partisan character of the orthodoxy it embraces. Both the problems and their solutions are predictable, and orthodoxy glows from every platitude.

Regarding the farm problem, the commission recommends: “Government programs of help for farmers, including price supports and other means to prevent collapse of incomes. . . .” Slum conditions in urban areas should be dealt with by “urban renewal programs, costing as much as $4 billion per year. . . .” The problem of segregation in housing should be solved by federal officials withholding of “assistance from housing projects that violate local fair housing policies.” The report recognizes threats to world peace and concludes that “the United States should join with other nations in seeking resolution of as many issues as possible through the United Nations, the Organization of American States, and other international agencies.” So far as Soviet Russian aggression is concerned, “We must stand firm wherever, as in Berlin, our commitments and interests are squarely opposed to those of the Soviets.” Regarding less developed nations, the commission maintains that the “preservation and strengthening of the free institutions of underdeveloped countries, and the defense of the free world, require a substantial increase in the amount of foreign aid, to be equitably shared by the major free nations.”

At home, the solution of the problem of education depends upon the mobilization of “greater resources—private, corporate, municipal, state, and federal. . . . A higher proportion of the gross national product must be devoted to educational purposes.” Racial prejudice may be expected to diminish when the government takes up its role of stimulating “changes of attitude. . . . The federal government should enforce the principle that federal funds shall not be disbursed to employers who discriminate on the basis of race.” The problem of health was not ignored by the commission. “Federal grants for the construction of hospitals,” they said, “should be continued and extended to other medical facilities. Increased private, state, and federal support is necessary for training doctors.”

The report is neither original nor innovative in what it proposes. Neither its assumptions nor its programs are new. Anyone schooled in the definitions and solutions of problems which have been offered nationally in the last thirty years should have been able to write the report.
with the thinking part of his mind turned off. Even the appointment of a Commission on National Goals is of a piece with the prevailing orthodoxy. It bespeaks a faith in group activity and thought. The notion that we should be informed by national goals indicates the spread of the organic conception of society. The penchant for raising all difficulties to the national level and defining them as national problems witnesses to a curvature of the mind hardened into an habitual path.

It will be difficult for twentieth century liberals who have an image of themselves as perpetual reformers to accept the fact that they have become orthodox keepers of the faith. The very concept of orthodoxy is repugnant to them. Did they not unseat the old orthodoxy by relativistic, experimental and pragmatic methods and arguments? Have they not ever avowed the necessity for continuous change and adjustment before the flux of circumstances? Were they not the ones who argued for the flexibility of the Constitution, for the relativity of morals, for the necessity of confronting new experiences with an open mind, for the tendency of groups in power to rationalize their private aggrandizement as public benefaction? The answer to all these questions is yes, but today the very truth of these assertions only serves to shield the liberal from the state of his beliefs.

It takes some doing to turn relativism, experimentation and pragmatism into absolutes. Yet it has been accomplished, or rather these methods of thought have been inactivated by beliefs which they were used to establish. Here are a few of the current absolutes. All peoples and races are inherently and absolutely equal in potentialities. All men have a right to adequate housing, minimum wages, sufficient food and clothing, proper medical care, quality education, and to the equal use of public facilities. The right to vote inheres in citizenship. Each of us is responsible for all of us, and all of us are responsible for each of us. Greater ability denotes increased responsibility, but need establishes a claim on services and goods. Democracy is an absolute good to be sought, and the degree to which the United States has achieved it is the measure of her perfection. We are as responsible for suffering in Laos as we are for suffering next door.

Reformers "debunked" the notion that the Constitution embodied immutable law, but their descendants have raised the introductory paragraphs of the Declaration of Independence to the position of a "higher law" in the land. Progressives worked assiduously to alter the images of the Founding Fathers, but their followers have virtually sanctified some of their own leaders. George Washington and Benjamin Franklin were shown to be fallible men, but Justices Holmes and Brandeis were raised to the rank of national heroes. Justice Roger Taney was a biased Southerner, a tool of the slaveholding interests, but Judge Learned Hand was a judicial statesman. The Supreme Court which balked at New Deal legislation was swayed by socio-economic interests and deserved only calumny and disrespect, but the present Court's integration decision must be obeyed because it is the law of the land. The giants of Progressivism—Lincoln Steffens, the early Charles A. Beard, Herbert Croly, William Allen White, Ida Tarbell—have been lionized and are, along with others already mentioned, the Patron Saints of the New Order.

Historians—Henry S. Commager, Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., Oscar Handlin, Henry F. May, Eric Goldman, Basil Rauch, Dexter Perkins, et. al.—have been busily creating a mythology for the new orthodoxy. This mythology is of the good ship America, sailing ever toward the ultimate
goal of democracy, made great by the cosmopolitan make-up of her passenger list which has constituted her a “melting pot,” but frequently in danger of capsizing on the shoals of reaction, intolerance, isolation and native Americanism. The ship has often drifted off course because of the error or indifference of such pilots as John Adams, James Buchanan, William McKinley, Warren Harding and Herbert Hoover, but she has, fortunately, been brought back on true course by such stalwarts as Thomas Jefferson, Andrew Jackson, Abraham Lincoln, Theodore Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson and Franklin D. Roosevelt.

The new orthodoxy has its invective to hurl at the unbeliever and would-be saboteur. It includes such words as reactionary, prejudiced, racist, anti-Semitic, chauvinist, isolationist, selfish, undemocratic, provincial, backward, Puritan, and absolutist, to mention a few. By contrast, it is good to be progressive, adjusted, realistic, democratic, internationalist, positive, flexible, cosmopolitan, tolerant, knowledgeable, and permissive. It should be noted, however, that where orthodoxies are involved words lose descriptive content and take on a normative character. Tolerance will be in reality only tolerance of orthodox attitudes.

While the sway of the new orthodoxy is not absolute, many conditions are right for further solidification of its position. No orthodoxy has ever had more potent means for its propagation. The mass media of communication make it possible to spread ideas and beliefs to the whole population. The diversity of the population of the United States makes it likely that national media will avoid the use of material which will be likely to offend groups. In consequence, only generally accepted views are likely to be heard. The threat to our independence and existence posed by Communist powers and the possibility of atomic warfare make national unity appear imperative. Anyone who offered objections to the current beliefs could be branded, at the least, as a disrupter of national unity. The programs stemming from the new orthodoxy are advanced under the banners of national and international necessity. The state of international communication is such that any domestic debate can have repercussions in the United Nations which could adversely affect a vote in that body. Dissent and debate may not be impossible in these circumstances but there are prohibitive difficulties in their way.

The trouble with an orthodoxy is not simply that its major tenets are erroneous. As a matter of fact, any orthodoxy contains some truth or has some validity, else men would not be able to operate on the basis of it—to the extent that it serves to guide human actions—without perpetual catastrophe. On the other hand, no orthodoxy promulgated by men has yet contained the whole truth, and we may doubt that any ever will. The vision of men is distorted by the particularity of their circumstances, the uniqueness of their time and place, their natures and nurture, selfishness, perversity, the poverty and bias of vocabulary, specialization which cuts off other aspects of reality—all of those things which make man less than God. Observers confuse the ephemeral with the eternal; thinkers mistake the clarity of linguistic connection with ontological relationship; the trained and untrained alike may interpret as revelation what is only consciously unremembered teachings from childhood. Moreover, the fact that it is an orthodoxy means that it is widely held, among the learned and unlearned, and that it will have been greatly watered down, oversimplified, and probably distorted in its spread. Hence, any orthodoxy will be to some degree pernicious, though there are undoubtedly offsetting virtues, in some at least.
But the current orthodoxy is pernicious on its own and does not need the support of a universal to make it so. Its basic premises—pragmatism, environmentalism, relativism—lay no foundation for any orthodoxy. The proponents of this outlook opposed all absolutes and avowed their belief in the necessity for continual change. But many of the beliefs which were formed in very particular circumstances have been dogmatized now. Thus, we have the spectacle of some “liberals” devotedly bewailing the plight of the organized laborer long after he has achieved a privileged position in the society. We witness the dogmatist insisting upon larger appropriations for housing to solve the problem of juvenile delinquency when for ought we know the solution may be contributing to the problem.

An orthodoxy inhibits new thought and new evaluations by making them unnecessary. It provides a completed version of reality, one which requires no further appeal to or incorporation of experience. If the cause of all inequalities among men is environmental it becomes irrelevant to look elsewhere, though minute investigations of environment will proceed apace. If the solution to all problems is federal aid, it is useless to explore other approaches. Suppose, for example, that much of juvenile delinquency could be attributed to the loosening of family ties. And suppose that one of the major explanations for this were the loss of economic vitality in family relationships. To put it more plainly, what if government provisions for children and for the aged were undermining the most potent basis for the family? What if foreign aid were establishing perpetual dependencies and regularly serving to buttress dictatorships? What if the presence of American military forces in Europe is contributing to the failure of European countries to develop their own armed forces? What if public welfare support for illegitimate children fosters immorality? What if government guaranteed security results in a spreading apathy?

These are live questions which ought to be given satisfactory answers. The orthodox find other explanations, of course. Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. wrote an article for Esquire in which he ascribed our apathy to a post-war letdown. Atlantic recently published an article which attributed the failures of public welfare to heavy case loads. Good minds are turned to making apologies for failures which will leave the orthodoxy intact. Legislators pass new legislation in vain attempts to correct the problems that earlier legislation has created.

The programs advanced by the Progressive reformers have resulted in a gradual and mounting diminution of liberty in America. The uses to which property may be put in many areas are so circumscribed that the form of private property remains but much of the substance has been drained away. In most occupations today one must contribute to Social Security if he is to remain employed. Income taxes are withheld in such a manner that an individual would find it difficult to test their legality in the courts, since he has no opportunity to refuse to pay them. The disposal of larger and larger sums of those rewards which we receive for the use of our liberty are taxed away. In most states parents cannot choose to educate their children in their own way but must send them to schools recognized, if not necessarily financed, by the state. Many states and communities have various compulsory health programs of one sort or another. Many communities have created a monopoly on the provision of certain services, and no one else may enter the business there. Cities have laws that effectively pro-
hibit one from making installations in his own home. Innumerable undertakings may not be begun without a permit from some one or more government bodies. The list could be almost indefinitely extended, but why add to it? Perhaps we have reached the point where it would be easier to name the liberties that remain (and they are usually circumscribed, as speech is by the “Clear and Present Danger Doctrine”).

The orthodox do not admit that these are losses of liberties. They distinguish between what they are pleased to call “human rights” and “property rights,” and admit only that there has been some circumscription of “property rights.” This is an almost wholly gratuitous distinction, for the only rights about which men discourse are human rights, including, of course, property rights. However, one cannot usually pursue discourse thus far with the orthodox, for discourse will already have been submerged beneath a plethora of invective. Thus, the orthodoxy diminishes freedom, but the new orthodoxy deny the validity of concepts which would make it apparent and resort to invective to inhibit discourse.

We need today some things the new orthodoxy cannot provide. We need, as have all men, enduring values, fixed points from which to make our observations and calculations, and a belief in truth so that we may seek it. In so far as the new orthodoxy is pragmatic, it cannot provide these needs. In so far as it is relativistic, it does not admit of the existence of such values. We need the experience of the ages, so much of which was casually discarded and denigrated by prideful intellectuals in the twentieth century. There have been great efforts, for example, to protect liberty in the past. Those who care for it today must at least profit from those efforts and the thought it spawned. Moreover, in so far as pragmatism and relativism are valuable analytical tools, their usefulness needs to be restored by wresting them from the dogmas which men arrived at who claimed to be using them.

One final thought. Those who believe in individual liberty today can take a leaf out of the book of the reformer. Orthodoxy has been changed from one time to another; or better still, orthodoxies have been demolished and the way opened for new and more thorough formulations. I mean to suggest that this has occurred by the agency of men advancing ideas. It can happen again if there are men who will set forth the theories and philosophies, who will make scholarly studies freed from the old biases, who will advance new ideas in the marketplace with courage and conviction—and, we may hope, with as great fidelity to the truth as they are given to see.