



Inside the Progressive Mind

Whatever else they disagree on, Republicans and Democrats are of one mind when it comes to paying lip service to the Constitution and its Framers. Unfortunately, however, far more frequently than not, this is just lip service — especially in the case of self-styled “progressives.” In reality, there is an unbridgeable chasm between, on the one hand, the progressive’s rhetoric concerning the Constitution and its progenitors and, on the other, his attitude toward them.

At best, the progressive views the Constitution as an instrument to be exploited for the sake of impeding the allegedly “unconstitutional” designs of his opponents. At worst — and for the most part — he regards it as an impediment to his own designs. Never does the progressive view the Constitution as the authority that its Framers intended for it to be.

Indeed, according to the very logic of the progressive’s vision, matters could not be otherwise. In other words, the progressive’s disdain for the Constitution and its authors will give way to genuine reverence if and only if he ceases to be a progressive.

What makes a progressive a progressive is that he has his eye forever on the future. The present has significance only inasmuch it supplies opportunities for paving the way for a brighter tomorrow. But for the past — the real past — there can be nothing but contempt on the progressive’s part. It isn’t that he is any more disinclined than anyone else to invoke past events and names when it suits his present purposes to do so. Yet the idea that the past has or can have any sort of authority over the present or future can only be anathema to the progressive.

There was a time when conservatives didn’t need to be reminded of this.

In the eighteenth century, at the height of the blood-soaked Revolution in France, Edmund Burke — “the patron saint of conservatism” — combated tirelessly the progressive conceit that the past is an encumbrance to be surmounted.

Burke noted that if “the temporary possessors” of society are “unmindful of what they have received from their ancestors,” then they are liable to “act as if they were the entire masters” and, thus, bring ruin upon “the whole original fabric of their society.” The ease with which the progressives of his time sought to transform the state according to “floating fancies or fashions” threatened to sever “the whole chain and continuity of the commonwealth.”

Famously, Burke declared that “We are afraid to put men to live and trade each on his own private





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stock of reason,” for “we suspect that this stock in each man is small, and that individuals would do better to avail themselves of the general bank and capital of nations and of ages.”

In glaring contrast, Thomas Paine, Burke’s contemporary — and adversary — expressed nothing short of outrage over the notion that the past has any sort of claim whatsoever on the present. “The vanity and presumption of governing beyond the grave is the most ridiculous and insolent of all tyrannies,” he asserted. “Man has no property in man; neither has any generation a property in the generations which are to follow.” Paine continued: “Every generation is, and must be, competent to all the purposes which its occasions require.”

Contra Burke, who he accused of “contending for the authority of the dead over the rights and freedom of the living,” Paine claimed that he was “contending for the rights of the living.” He objected fiercely to “the rights of the living” being forfeited to “the manuscript assumed authority of the dead.” Paine mocked Burke’s reverence for the wisdom of his ancestors by charging him with positing a sort of “political Adam, in whom all posterity are bound for ever.”

Paine’s vision is the progressive’s vision. And we can rest assured that our contemporaries on the left find the notion of a “political Adam” just as indefensible, just as ludicrous, as Paine found it.

But since our “political Adam” is represented by America’s Founders, this in turn implies that, if they are honest with themselves, progressives must acknowledge that it is at once indefensible and ludicrous that their compatriots should defer to the Founders.



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