



The Progressive Legacy: Part III

Theodore Roosevelt was so determined that the United States should intervene against Spain's suppression of an uprising in Cuba that he quit his post as Assistant Secretary of the Navy to organize his own private military force — called "Rough Riders" — to fight in what became the Spanish-American war.



The spark that set off this war was an explosion that destroyed an American battleship anchored in Havana harbor. There was no proof that Spain had anything to do with it, and a study decades later suggested that the explosion originated inside the ship itself.

But Roosevelt and others were hot for intervention before the explosion, which simply gave them the excuse they needed to go to war against Spain, seizing Puerto Rico and the Philippines.

Although it was a Republican administration that did this, Democrat Woodrow Wilson justified it. Progressive principles of imposing superior wisdom and virtue on others were invoked.

Wilson saw the indigenous peoples brought under American control as beneficiaries of progress. He said, "they are children and we are men in these deep matters of government and justice."

If that sounds racist, it is perfectly consistent with President Wilson's policies at home. The Wilson administration introduced racial segregation in Washington government agencies where it did not exist when Wilson took office.

Woodrow Wilson also invited various dignitaries to the White House to watch a showing of the film *The Birth of a Nation*, which glorified the Ku Klux Klan — and which Wilson praised.

All of this was consistent with the Progressive era in general, when supposedly "scientific" theories of racial superiority and inferiority were at their zenith. Theodore Roosevelt was the exception, rather than the rule, among Progressives when he did not agree with these theories.

Consistent with President Wilson's belief in racial superiority as a basis for intervening in other countries, he launched military interventions in various Latin American countries, before his intervention in the First World War.

Woodrow Wilson was also a precursor of later Progressives in assuming that the overthrow of an autocratic and despotic government means an advance toward democracy. In 1917, President Wilson spoke of "heartening things that have been happening within the last few weeks in Russia."

What was "heartening" to Wilson was the overthrow of the czars. What it led to in fact was the rise of a totalitarian tyranny that killed more political prisoners in a year than the czars had killed in more than 90 years.

Although Wilson proclaimed that the First World War was being fought because "The world must be



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made safe for democracy,” in reality the overthrow of autocratic rule in Germany and Italy also led to totalitarian regimes that were far worse. Those today who assume that the overthrow of authoritarian governments in Egypt and Libya is a movement toward democracy are following in Wilson’s footsteps.

The ultimate hubris of Woodrow Wilson was in promoting the carving up of whole empires after the First World War, in the name of “the self-determination of peoples.” But, in reality, it was not the peoples who did the carving but Wilson, French Premier Georges Clemenceau and British Prime Minister David Lloyd George. Walter Lippmann saw what a reckless undertaking this was. He said, “We are feeding on maps, talking of populations as if they were abstract lumps.” He was struck by the ignorance of those who were reshaping whole nations and the lives of millions of people.

He said of this nation-building effort: “When you consider what a mystery the East Side of New York is to the West Side, the business of arranging the world to the satisfaction of the people in it may be seen in something like its true proportions.”

But Progressives, especially intellectuals, are the least likely to suspect that they are in fact ignorant of the things they are intervening in, whether back in the Progressive era or today.

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