



Written by [Thomas DiLorenzo](#) on March 17, 2026

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## The Curse of “Progressivism”

### AT A GLANCE

- Progressivism, a Big Government movement, is very closely allied to socialism.
- Teddy Roosevelt was the first progressive president.
- Woodrow Wilson enacted much of the progressives’ agenda.
- Progressivism continued after World War I with Herbert Hoover.



In his book *The Progressive Era*, Murray N. Rothbard makes the case that government policies during “the progressive period” (roughly the mid-1890s to the mid-1920s) should be considered as the origin of the “welfare-warfare state” in America. American society went from “a roughly free and *laissez-faire* society ... when the economy was free, taxes were low [there was no income tax], persons were free in their daily lives, and the government was noninterventionist at home and abroad,” to “a welfare-warfare imperial State, where people’s daily lives were controlled and regulated to a massive degree.”

In *Progressivism: A Primer on the Idea Destroying America*, legal scholar James Ostrowski explains how progressivism was the result of a generations-long assault on “historical liberalism,” the system of individual freedom, relatively free markets and free societies, and limited constitutional government. In its place was to be a “quasi-religious belief in state action.” It is “quasi-religious,” writes Ostrowski, because “the progressive offers no plausible argument for his positions” and “does not and cannot proffer empirical data to support his view. And no amount of contrary evidence will change his mind.”

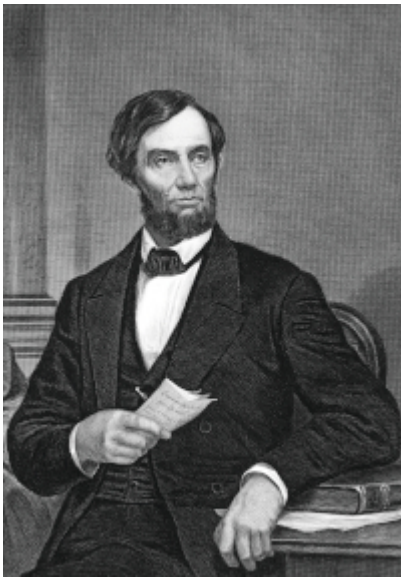
Ostrowski would undoubtedly agree with the basic premise of Thomas Sowell’s book *The Vision of the Anointed*. Sowell shows how, with myriad public policies regarding crime, education, economics, and more, the “progressive” political Left routinely ignores *decades* of experience, research, and facts that prove the failures of their Big Government policies. “For this reason, some people are calling progressivism a mental illness,” he writes.



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Abraham Lincoln (Adobe Stock / Georgios Kollidas)

That is going a little too far. Socialism has been a human and societal catastrophe wherever it has existed, yet it always has benefited the ruling class while impoverishing everyone else. It wouldn't exist if *someone* did not benefit from it — usually the people with the most guns. The same can be said for socialism's close cousin (or identical twin), progressivism.

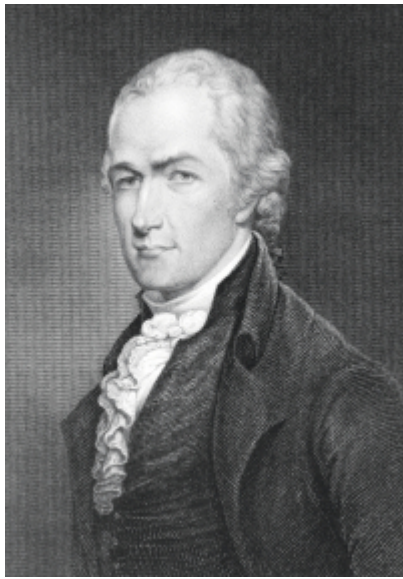
Progressivism didn't just appear in the mid-1890s, but was the result of a century-long ideological battle. As evidence of this, Ostrowski includes such historical figures as Alexander Hamilton and Abraham Lincoln in his "rogues gallery of progressives." Indeed, Hamilton as treasury secretary badgered George Washington to create a government of "more energy." He denounced the newly ratified Constitution as "a frail and worthless fabric" because it limited government too much; invented the insidious idea of "implied powers" in the Constitution during his famous debate with Thomas Jefferson over the constitutionality of a national bank run by politicians out of the national capital; absurdly argued that the Commerce Clause of the Constitution gives the federal government authority to regulate *all* commerce; championed European-style "mercantilism" in the form of what we today call "corporate welfare" for politically connected corporations; favored the corporate welfare of protectionist tariffs and a national bank modeled after the Bank of England; and called for a large national debt, which he called a "blessing" (the wealthy would own most of the government bonds, the Machiavellian Hamilton argued, and would become a lobbying force for higher taxes with which to pay off the principal and interest on their government bonds). He talked Washington into sending 15,000 militiamen into Pennsylvania to apprehend the whiskey tax protesters and urged the president to hang all of the leaders (Washington pardoned all of them). He invented the doctrine of "resultant powers," an insidious idea that if the government did something that was unconstitutional, the fact that it did so makes that thing *de facto* constitutional! In the Hamiltonian world, anything government does is constitutional; the Constitution is nothing more than a rubber stamp on its actions.



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Alexander Hamilton (Adobe Stock / Georgios Kollidas)

In his renowned book *Lincoln the Man*, Edgar Lee Masters (Clarence Darrow's law partner and a famous playwright) called Lincoln "the political son of Alexander Hamilton." And so he was. Lincoln destroyed the voluntary Union of the Founding Fathers and replaced it with a coerced Union held together by the massive bloodshed of total war. He all but destroyed the uniquely American system of federalism by centralizing almost all political power in Washington, D.C., by eliminating the rights of secession and nullification. Lincoln was a statist on economics, introduced the first income tax (though it ended after the war), raised tariffs 10 times, commenced tax-funded railroad industry subsidies, signed into law the nationalization of the money supply with his National Currency and Legal Tender Acts, suspended the writ of habeas corpus and imprisoned tens of thousands of Northern political dissenters during the war, shut down more than 300 opposition newspapers in the North, waged total war on the civilian population of the South, and sold the slaves that his wife inherited from her wealthy Kentucky plantation-owning family. He signed the first federal military conscription law, ordered the execution of deserters, and ordered the shooting of hundreds of draft protesters during the New York City draft riots in July 1863. He deported his top congressional critic, Democrat Clement Vallandigham of Ohio.

Perhaps worst of all, Lincoln's creation of a gigantic, Leviathan-sized warfare state created the impression that government could be a "problem solver" if only enough coercion and violence were applied, as Jeffrey Hummel concluded in *Emancipating Slaves, Enslaving Free Men*. All of this is why modern-day progressive academics have praised "the Lincoln dictatorship," claiming it to somehow have been a "good" dictatorship because it established so many "good" precedents of ignoring the constitutional limits on government. It is why progressive President Theodore Roosevelt wrote in his autobiography that in "the days of Abraham Lincoln" the Republican Party was founded "as the radical progressive party of the Nation." Lincoln was in fact America's first progressive president.

Progressive historian James McPherson wrote an entire book about how Lincoln's domestic policies created "a blueprint for modern America"; a progressive blueprint, that is, created by a widely acknowledged elected dictator, every progressive politician's ideal.

John C. Calhoun presciently predicted the development of progressivism decades before the word was even invented. (The word implies, by the way, that if you oppose or criticize the ideas of a progressive



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you must be against progress! It is progressives who perverted the word “liberal” from its original meaning — as being in favor of peace, free markets, civil society, constitutionalism, and limited government — to the exact opposite.)



Theodore Roosevelt (Getty Images / ilbusca)

In his 1850 treatise *A Disquisition on Government*, Calhoun wrote that in a democracy there will inevitably be two classes of people: net taxpayers and net tax consumers. The former pay more in taxes than they receive in benefits from government (the productive class), whereas the latter (government bureaucrats, politicians, special interest groups) receive more from the government than they pay in taxes (the parasitic class). Because of this, said Calhoun, a mere written constitution would not be sufficient to contain the Leviathan state. Something else, such as state nullification, would be needed. According to Calhoun:

The party in power — whichever party — will be opposed to the constitutional restrictions intended to limit it. As the major and dominant party, they will have no need of these restrictions. The ballot box ... would be ample protection to them. They would regard the limitations as unnecessary and improper restraints, and endeavor to elude them, with a view of increasing their power and influence.

The minor, weaker party on the other hand, will make its strict construction arguments for actually enforcing the Constitution, but the party in favor of the restrictions will inevitably be overpowered. It is folly to believe that the party in power and in possession of the ballot box and the physical force of the country could be successfully resisted by an appeal to reason, truth, justice, or the obligations imposed by the Constitution. The end of the contest will be the subversion of the Constitution.

In essence, it was the victory of the political parasitic class over the productive class in a century-long ideological debate that made the Progressive Era of the late 19th and early 20th centuries possible through decades of subversion of the constitutional limits on government. Progressive icon Woodrow Wilson wrote in *Congressional Government* that one good result of the Civil War was that the federal government, through its Supreme Court, finally became the sole arbiter of the limits on its own powers. This is how America was turned into a hyper-interventionist, imperialistic, mostly constitution-less



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welfare-warfare state.

## Progressives and Their “Era”

The year 1896 was a momentous turning point in American history, for the postwar Democratic Party, which had been the party of free trade, hard money, personal liberty, and limited constitutional government, was captured by what Rothbard called the “inflationist, statist forces of William Jennings Bryan.” From that point on, there was the statist Republican Party, which was essentially the party of crony capitalism and corporate welfare, and the Democratic Party of Bryan, which was even more statist and interventionist. The American welfare-warfare state would soon be born.

Theodore Roosevelt was the first progressive president of the Progressive Era, and he made that very clear. He denounced constitutional limits on government and abhorred the Jeffersonian tradition of decentralized, limited government under the Jeffersonian quip that that government is best which governs least. In the middle of America’s Industrial Revolution and a production boom that had caused price *deflation* for the previous three decades, he commenced a harebrained crusade against “monopoly” that ended up crippling some of America’s most dynamic, competitive industries. His railroad-industry regulators were soon politically “captured” by the railroad industry itself, with the result being government-enforced price fixing that made the industry *more* monopolistic, not less. The same result came from the creation of the Food and Drug Administration. Food and drug corporations embraced the regulation of their industries because they knew that it would disadvantage their smaller competitors and prevent others from entering the industry in the first place. More regulation, more monopoly power.

Roosevelt’s “trust busting” punished the most efficient company in America, Standard Oil, for the “crime” of tremendously expanding production, inventing myriad new products, and *dropping* prices for 46 years by breaking the company up into several appendages, all to the benefit of Standard Oil’s less-efficient competitors at the expense of the hapless American consumers.



U.S. Federal Reserve building (Getty Images / uschools)

In the name of “conservation,” Roosevelt reversed the century-long trend of privatization of (supposedly) government-owned land by nationalizing more than 400 million acres under the absurd theory that politicians and bureaucrats who have no personal financial stake in the land will manage it better than those who do. Grazing lands were used as a political pork barrel whereby federal politicians



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leased the lands at far-below-market rates to politically connected ranchers — in return for campaign contributions, of course. Timber corporations were treated in the same way. This resulted in massive overgrazing by ranchers that led to desertification in parts of the American West, and the denuding of forests from the practice of “clear cutting” vast stretches of forest land and not replanting, as is routinely done on private forest land.

Roosevelt’s Federal Bureau of Reclamation was another political football. It sold water cheaply in whatever way would solicit the most votes and campaign contributions to Roosevelt and his party, creating a colossal waste of water resources. This regulatory monster is a source of perpetual conflict over water to this day.

Theodore Roosevelt was an unhinged warmonger who intervened militarily in numerous countries for reasons having nothing to do with defending anyone or anything in America. He publicly denounced “the menace of peace” and was subsequently awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. He ordered or supported the invasion of Cuba, Hawaii, Venezuela, China, the Philippines, Panama, Chile, the Dominican Republic, Nicaragua, Canada, and Spain. American intervention during the 1899-1902 Philippine Insurrection alone caused the deaths of at least 200,000 Filipinos. All of this was done for the purpose of conquest, subjugation, and plunder of foreign countries, not national defense. America was no longer a constitutional republic, but an empire. Roosevelt casually dismissed men who criticized this, such as Mark Twain, Andrew Carnegie, and President Grover Cleveland, as “men of a bygone era.”

## **The Worst President in American History?**

Roosevelt’s secretary of war, William Howard Taft, was his hand-picked successor and served as president for the next four years. He continued Rooseveltian military adventurism in Latin America, helping to further cement into place the U.S. government’s imperialist credentials. He was followed by uber-progressive Woodrow Wilson, whose reelection campaign slogan was “He Kept Us Out of War.” Three months after his second inauguration day, he asked Congress for a declaration of war against Germany, which posed no threat to America or Americans. The United States entered World War I in 1917, and Wilson’s war to supposedly “make the world safe for democracy” and “end all wars” resulted in 116,516 Americans dead and another 320,000 wounded, physically and mentally.

Although Wilson claimed that all of this death and destruction was justified by saving democracy from the Germans, the fact is that Germany at the time had freedom of the press, including criticism of the Kaiser; a broader voting franchise than that of England (the prime instigator of war with Germany); and due process. The Kaiser had fewer executive powers than Wilson.

With typical progressive quasi-religious language, Wilson played God when, following World War I, he once declared that “there will come sometime ... another struggle in which, not a few hundred thousand fine men from America will have to die, but ... many millions ... to accomplish the final freedom of the peoples of the world.” One wonders what the authors of the U.S. Constitution would think of his admonition that a legitimate role of government was to conscript millions of Americans in a war that would cost millions of lives for the supposed benefit of all *other* countries of the world. Presumably, neither Wilson nor members of his family were intended to be among the millions of Americans who “will have to die.”

Wilson bribed the Russian Provisional Government with American tax dollars to enter World War I, with



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the result being some 400,000 dead Russians. The Bolsheviks were the only antiwar party in Russia at the time, and the horrific death toll gave them such a boost that Lenin once said that “Our revolution was born of the war.” Well done, Woodrow.



Disposal of liquor during Prohibition (Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division)

Wilson imposed “war socialism” on America by nationalizing numerous industries. His National Defense Act gave him the power to order corporations to produce military products under threat of felony prosecution. The Army Appropriations Act gave him power to seize private property, Soviet style. The government took over the railroad industry under this act. His War Industries Board engaged in full-fledged central planning of the entire economy, again Soviet style.

Military conscription was imposed along with an espionage act that included a 20-year prison sentence for “interfering” with conscription, which meant criticizing it. All telephone and telegraph communication was censored, and thousands were imprisoned for criticizing the war. And to think that Woodrow Wilson accused *the Germans* of threatening freedom and democracy in the world!

The federal income tax, a cornerstone of Wilson’s 1912 “New Freedom” agenda, was adopted along with the Federal Reserve and the 17th Amendment that took the election of U.S. senators out of the hands of state legislatures and replaced it with a popular vote, all in the year 1913. Without the Fed and the income tax, it isn’t likely that the United States would have been able to enter the war at all.

The adoption of the income tax was the greatest assault on private property in American history. As explained by Frank Chodorov in *The Income Tax: Root of All Evil*, what the government was saying to the citizens is this:

Your earnings are not exclusively your own; we have a claim on them, and our claim precedes yours; we will allow you to keep some of it, because we recognize your need, not your right; but whatever we grant you for yourself is for us to decide.... The amount of your earnings that you may retain for yourself is determined by the needs of government, and you have nothing to say about it.

The 13th Amendment to the Constitution outlaws indentured servitude, but that was simply ignored by Wilson and the Supreme Court regarding conscription. It was Lincoln who established the false notion



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that the Constitution may be ignored during wartime for a “higher purpose” (such as making the entire world “safe for democracy”).

As for the 17th Amendment, until that point if a senator voted against the wishes and well-being of the people of his home state, he could be recalled immediately and replaced by the state legislature. Seven senators were recalled in the 1830s during Andrew Jackson’s presidency, when they promised to support Jackson in his crusade to defund the precursor of the Fed, the Second Bank of the United States, and then did the opposite upon reaching Washington. Ever since the 17th Amendment was ratified, special-interest money has trumped the will of the people of the states when it comes to senatorial voting. A newly elected senator can spend the next six years raising “campaign contributions” from special-interest groups to finance his reelection campaign. The progressives promised that the 17th Amendment would enhance democracy. Instead, it enhanced corruption and bribery.

And, of course, there was the disaster of alcohol prohibition that notoriously caused a great spike in violent crime with the takeover of much of the alcoholic beverage industry by organized crime. Progressives had long been lobbying for prohibition, and with it the progressive agenda was indeed in full bloom.

Many progressives at the time were “postmillennialists” who believed that the state had to be used as their instrument with which to eradicate sin in the world and create a thousand-year Kingdom of God on Earth to make way for the Second Coming of Jesus Christ. (They apparently assumed that God was not really God Almighty, but needed the assistance of political activists in the progressive movement.) For them, three major sins to be eradicated were alcohol consumption, Catholicism (most of the leading intellectual lights of progressivism were of New England Puritan Protestant descent), and doing anything on Sundays other than going to church and reading the Bible. They sought to corral all American children into public schools so that the children of all the newer Catholic and Lutheran immigrants from Europe could be turned into good little Protestants — and progressives — like themselves.

## **The Heyday of Progressivism**

In *The Progressive Era*, Rothbard wrote that World War I “brought the fulfillment of all these progressive trends. Militarism, conscription, massive intervention at home and abroad, a collectivized war economy, all came about during the war and created a mighty cartelized system that most of its leaders spent the rest of their lives trying to recreate.”

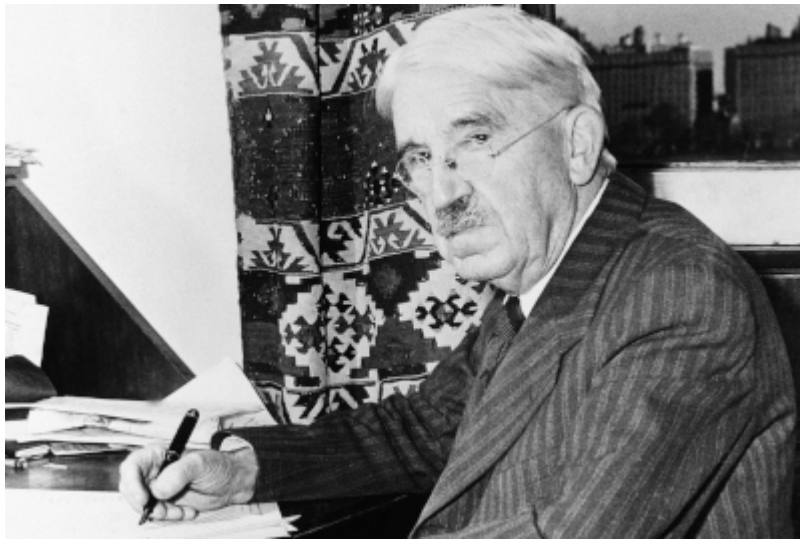
The leading progressive intellectual of the day was John Dewey, and the leading progressive publication was *The New Republic* magazine. Dewey claimed to be a pacifist, but was a powerful and influential supporter of Wilson’s war. To Dewey, all of the government intervention, censorship, and socialist central planning during the war was a model of what life in America should be like in peacetime. He mouthed the old nonsensical socialist slogan that “we are beginning to produce for use, not for sale” (it is hard to sell something that is useless to others, by the way!), and cheerfully announced that war socialism had proved that capitalism was on the way out.



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John Dewey (AP Photo)

The second-most influential progressive “intellectual” was Walter Lippmann, who was the loudest supporter of the war but secured a draft exemption for himself by claiming that his father was dying and his mother was alone in the world. His father lived another 10 years. Like Dewey, he wanted to use the example of war socialism to plan peacetime socialism.

Richard T. Ely, who taught at Johns Hopkins University and the University of Wisconsin, was just as influential as Dewey in progressive circles. A lifelong war supporter, he was especially enthusiastic about conscription, which he thought should be used during peacetime to conscript an “industrial army” of young people to take orders from government bureaucrats, Hitler Youth style. He was a co-founder of the American Economic Association, the founding document of which announced that the doctrine of *laissez-faire* (i.e., economic freedom) was “unsafe in politics and unsound in morals.”

## The Progressivism of Herbert Hoover

Like Theodore Roosevelt, Herbert Hoover is thought by many to have been a conservative, when in reality he was a hyper-interventionist progressive as president. As historian Joan Hoff Wilson wrote in *Herbert Hoover: Forgotten Progressive*, Hoover as commerce secretary and later as president sought to use government intervention to address perceived problems of too much “destructive competition,” too much “lawlessness,” too many hours of work, some people making “too much money,” and too little labor-union power.

It was lost on Hoover that the big problem with “lawlessness” was that so much of it was caused by Prohibition. His complaining about too much competition was pandering to large corporations like the ones that had employed him as a mining engineer. Consumers never complain about too many choices and too-low prices from competition. Moreover, government-mandated reduction in work hours is a good way to cause a recession.

As commerce secretary, Hoover was a frenetic regulator, interfering in broadcasting, airlines, advertising, oil, electric power, farming, ocean shipping, and much more. As president, he was an even more fervent interventionist. He strong-armed corporations to raise wages during the Great Depression, guaranteeing even higher unemployment. He signed the 1930 Smoot-Hawley Tariff Act, which ignited an international trade war that shrunk world trade by two-thirds in three years, exacerbating the Depression. Public-works (aka, make-work jobs) spending accounted for 13 percent of the entire



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budget, and the tax increases to pay for it all depressed the private sector even further. As Rothbard wrote in *America's Great Depression*, "the range of tax increases was enormous. Many wartime excise taxes were revived, [and] sales taxes were imposed on gasoline, tires, autos, electric energy, malt, toiletries, furs, jewelry, and other articles." The new income tax was also "raised drastically," he added.



Herbert Hoover (Library of Congress)

It was Hoover who started the business of paying farmers for *not* growing food or raising livestock (to supposedly increase farm incomes by increasing the price of food). All consumers suffered from the subsequent higher food prices during the Depression. Reduced agricultural production also meant reduced agricultural employment, making unemployment during the Depression even more severe.

At the end of his presidency, Hoover began to understand the error of his ways. Major American corporations were calling for even more government intervention, which they hoped to control in a way that would guarantee them profits, as they had with wartime defense contracts. In particular, big business endorsed "The Swope Plan," named after General Electric CEO Gerard Swope. Some corporate executives were even calling for an "economic Mussolini!"

Though Hoover recognized this as economic fascism and would have none of it, the plan would be adopted by Hoover's successor, Franklin Delano Roosevelt. It essentially created government-enforced cartels with the National Recovery Act (NRA) and Agricultural Adjustment Act, both of which essentially outlawed price competition. (They were both ruled unconstitutional by the Supreme Court in 1935). As John T. Flynn explained in *The Roosevelt Myth*:

[Mussolini] organized each ... industrial group or professional group into a state-supervised trade association. He called it a corporative.... The NRA provided that ... each industry should be organized into a federally supervised trade association. It was not called a corporative. It was called a Code Authority. But it was essentially the same thing.... This was fascism.

Hoover's rejection of this scheme was "his finest hour," wrote Rothbard. With FDR, progressivism became a combination of corporatism, socialism, and fascism. What a curse.



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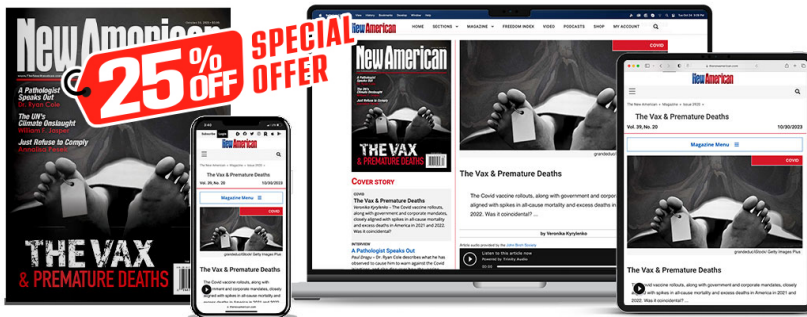
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