

**Wilsonian Progressives**  
**By Dr. Rick Farmer**  
**For the J. Rufus Fears Fellowship**

In this segment we are going to talk about how progressives have turned our attention away from the founding principles of free enterprise, limited government, individual initiative and personal responsibility.

The rise of Woodrow Wilson marks the beginning of the Progressive Era. However, this starts long before Wilson became president. Science was emerging as a powerful force in the late 1800s. In Germany scholars were trying to study government using scientific methods. Johns Hopkins University was founded in 1876 in an attempt to bring that German scholarly approach to the US. Wilson was one of its early graduates in 1886.

In Political Science we are taught to revere Woodrow Wilson. He was the sixth president of the American Political Science Association. He is the only political scientist to become president of the United States. His ideas about how societies are best governed can be traced to his early writings at Johns Hopkins and the influence of his German trained mentors.<sup>1</sup> He is known for his writings about Congress, the presidency, political parties and public administration. Most consider him the father of the modern Civil Service.

Wilson was also the first president to criticize the founder's ideals.<sup>2</sup> He believed that the industrial era had outpaced the abilities of the Constitution. For Professor Wilson, separation of powers was an impediment to government action. He preferred a British style parliament, with unified legislative and executive power.

He also criticized the ideals in the Declaration of Independence. Wilson said, "If you want to understand the real Declaration of Independence, do not repeat the preface."<sup>3</sup> He argued the high ideals of God given rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness were historical context for the grievances that followed and not timeless truths. In contrast, 50 years earlier Abraham Lincoln had seen these as "abstract" truths that were "applicable to all men and all times."<sup>4</sup>

This departure from the Founders thinking was based on Wilson's understanding of the nature of man. Wilson believed that modern society would evolve, and the nature of man would evolve with it. He anticipated a unity of sentiment.<sup>5</sup> Speaking for the Founders, James Madison foresaw conflict emerging between factions when he wrote, "factions" are "sown in the nature of man."<sup>6</sup>

If there is unity of sentiment, then all government is left to do is provide an efficient administration of the public will. There is no need for checks and balances.

In keeping with the theme of science, Wilson's metaphor for the Constitution was a machine designed around the Newton's principles of physics. He preferred to see

government as a biological organism that evolves as Darwin described.<sup>7</sup> The mechanics of separation of powers were slowing the evolution of government.

Having dismissed the idea of inalienable rights, Wilson pointed us down a path toward social change based on trendy ideas and effectuated by unchecked power.

Aristotle posited that unchecked democracy always reverts to tyranny.<sup>8</sup> Tyranny was exactly what the American Founders sought prevent. Preserving self-evident, inalienable rights was their primary purpose. They created a structure that used human nature to achieve their goals, pitting ambition against ambition rather than hoping that men would evolve to become angels.<sup>9</sup>

The progressives who follow Wilson's ideas have continually chipped away at liberty by putting government in charge of more and more aspects of American life. And, they have chipped away at the Constitutional protections from the tyranny of democracy.

As George Will points out in his book *The Conservative Sensibility*, the more aspects of life that government controls, the more interest groups have an incentive to form and to influence government policy.<sup>10</sup> The smaller government is, the more freedom we enjoy and the less we feel the need to influence government.

In his book *The Road to Serfdom*, F. A. Hayek says that attempts to control the economy will ultimately require control of all aspects of life.<sup>11</sup> The end result of Progressivism can only be tyranny and despotism.

Progressives attempt to circumvent the electoral college is their latest effort to chip away at our republic and the Constitution that protects it.<sup>12</sup> Wilson, frustrated with Congress, began adding presidential prerogatives. A plebiscitic presidency<sup>13</sup> with vast unchecked powers is exactly what Aristotle warned against and the Founders feared.

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<sup>1</sup> Prestritto, Ronald J. 2005. *Woodrow Wilson and the Roots of Modern Liberalism*. Lanham MD: Rowman & Littlefield, pg. 8.

<sup>2</sup> Will, George F. 2019. *The Conservative Sensibility*. NY: Hachette Books. pg xix.

<sup>3</sup> Wilson, Woodrow. 1911. "Address to the Jefferson Club of Los Angeles."

<sup>4</sup> Lincoln, Abraham. 1859. "Letter to Henry L. Pierce."

<sup>5</sup> Prestritto, Ronald J. 2005. *Woodrow Wilson and the Roots of Modern Liberalism*. Lanham MD: Rowman & Littlefield, pg. 6.

<sup>6</sup> Madison, James. 1787. "Federalist 10."

<sup>7</sup> Wilson, Woodrow. 1913. "What is Progress?"

<sup>8</sup> Aristotle. 350 BC. *Politics*.

<sup>9</sup> Madison, James. 1788. "Federalist 51."

<sup>10</sup> See George Will's *The Conservative Sensibility* (2019) pgs 131-134.

<sup>11</sup> Hayek, F. A. 1994. "Preface 1956" in *The Road to Serfdom* (1944). Chicago Press, pg xlii.

<sup>12</sup> See Trent England's "The Danger of the Attacks on the Electoral College" in *Imprimis*, June 2019.

<sup>13</sup> See Theodore Lowi's *The Personal President* (1985).