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THE FUTURE OF AMERICAN
PROGRESSIVISM

AN INITIATIVE FOR POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC REFORM

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CHAPTER 1 THE INEVITABLE

Open almost any mainstream newspaper or news magazine in the world today, and you will find the news of the world shaped by the same story line. The line goes like this. After the collapse of communism, thinking people all over the planet finally came to agree that there is only one reliable road to freedom and prosperity. To enter this road, every country must establish some version of the political and economic institutions that have long been secure in the United States and much of Western Europe. The move often requires painful adjust-

ment, austerity, and sacrifice. There are many obstacles and surprises along the way. However, the direction of the path is not in doubt.

The social misery that may come, initially, with conformity to the path triggers a populist backlash. People rebel against the increasing inequality, joblessness, or insecurity that taking the one true way sometimes causes. The rebellion is likely to be most vigorous in the societies that must travel furthest to reach the fork toward the right road: the developing countries of Latin America and Africa or the postcommunist countries of Eastern Europe and Asia. There, a ragtag assortment of neocommunists, nationalists, and demagogues try, usually without much success, to ride the wave of popular resentment. Even Western Europe, with its entrenched social-democratic traditions, needs adjustments. Inefficient industries, high unemployment, and unsustainable deficits make European leaders of the center-left as well as the center-right anxious to reconcile European-style social protections with American-style market flexibility.

Their efforts speak to a universal concern. The doctrine of the one true way claims to describe the inevitable in politics and economics. Insofar as possible,

however, the inevitable, according to those who tell this story, should be humanized: the arrangements implementing the inevitable should compensate for individual hardship. By combining adjustments to the free market with programs to help the poor and the jobless, without destroying their incentive to work, we ensure decency and prevent the populist backlash from getting out of hand. Thus, the humanization of the inevitable, the attempt to make the one true way less cruel to those who suffer on the road to freedom and prosperity, becomes the watchword of chastened progressives everywhere. Their program becomes the program of their adversaries—with a discount, and a falling one at that.

There is, however, at least one country in the world where the doctrine of the one true way and its companion, the humanization of the inevitable, remain insecure. That country is the winner of the Cold War; it enjoys unrivaled cultural, political, and economic leadership in the world; and is supposedly the very embodiment of the one true way. That country is the United States.

The oldest and most American element of American life is the religion of individual and collective possibility: the

belief that Americans can make themselves and remake their society, that they can make everything new. The American dream includes a middle-class standard of living for everyone, with economic independence and security, as well as opportunities for people's children to achieve what their parents failed to accomplish or obtain. It also relies upon a more intangible but immensely powerful idea of freedom from being bossed around in one's choice of life, tastes, and beliefs.

Today, however, at the apogee of its world power and in the midst of an economy thriving as rarely before, most working Americans feel more squeezed than ever, and convinced that life will be harder for them than it was for their parents. Even politically active and educated elites feel incapable of addressing, much less solving, many of the basic problems of the country, from inadequate health care and education to the social and racial apartheid of inner-city poverty, from increasing inequality of wealth and income to abstention from the vote and indifference to politics. The practical consequence of this national failure is that Americans despair of collective solutions to their collective problems, and alternate between resenting the incapable politics of their country and blaming themselves for failure to succeed at a game that so often seems rigged against them.

The young in the elite universities—the youth of an imperial power—feel the more disenchanted the more serious they are, as if they had been born at the wrong place and the wrong time, as if everything interesting in the world were happening somewhere else. The size of the country, and the decentralization of power and influence within it, play a part in their frustration: almost any measure of influence an individual can hope to gain seems dwarfed by the sheer bigness and variety of the United States. So does the absence from national life of anything other than a politics of inconclusive bargaining among organized interests about minor fix-its. In this American circumstance the triumphalism of the doctrine of the one true way rings hollow. National triumph goes hand in hand with individual impotence.

CHAPTER 2 THE AMERICAN RELIGION OF POSSIBILITY

Speaking in Madison Square Garden during his unsuccessful campaign for reelection as president of the United States, Herbert Hoover summarized the quintessential American self-conception when he said: "It is by the maintenance of equality of opportunity and therefore of a society absolutely fluid in freedom of the movement of its human particles that our individualism departs from the individualism of Europe. We resent class distinction because there can be no rise for the individual through the frozen strata of classes and no

stratification of class can take place in a mass livened by the free rise of its particles." Not even the people standing in bread lines outside could impress upon Hoover the incongruity of seeing the country as a collection of free-floating particles rising and falling in an unresisting social medium.

Hoover was describing a facet of the American religion of possibility. In America, men and women have placed hope above memory. They have believed that the future remains open to national renewal as well as to individual self-transformation. They have refused to believe that anything in their situation condemns them to languish in permanent poverty, dependency, and weakness. They have rejected the idea that their country was locked by its history into an orbit of familiar solutions to recurrent problems. They have insisted that, both as individuals and together, people can confront and defeat the forces that prevent them from living more fully and freely.

Hoover's claims highlight the social side of this idea of possibility. It is the belief that everyone can lift themselves up from the bottom, and win power to shape their immediate circumstances. In their own lifetime and the lifetimes of their children, they can escape penury and subjection, and achieve a measure of independence. A

family farm, a small independent business, or a stable, respectable job in an organization or profession, have been the most traditional bases of such an independence. According to this idea of social opportunity, class distinctions in America have never become so rigid as to prevent the rise of the individual.

Individual effort remains the primary instrument of self-empowerment. There may often be obstacles to this free movement of the "human particles" that individual self-reliance is unable, unassisted, to overcome. Collective action may then become necessary: people working together in their communities, jobs, churches, and clubs. To be effective, according to the dominant version of the American religion of possibility, such a joint effort must be uncoerced. Above all, it must never be commandeered and orchestrated by government except in extreme situations or over a narrow, well-defined range of problems.

According to this view, voluntary association does not suffice to make self-reliance effective for the broad masses of ordinary Americans. Governmental action may also be needed to make self-reliance work. There are many basic needs—like the requirement of universal public education—that will always demand initiative by government. Sometimes a great crisis, or the accu-

culated effect of slow but profound changes in the organization of the society and the economy, may require an expansion of governmental activism. In its form and scope, however, such an expansion should be careful to respect the primacy of individual initiative and free association.

There has almost always been just enough opportunity in America to make this facet of the American religion of possibility plausible. Each epoch in American history witnesses its own paradoxical developments, extending social mobility in some respects while limiting it in others. Today, for example, there is evidence that, while the differences between rich and poor have widened, the role of inherited advantage, the hereditary transmission of property and inherited educational opportunity, has diminished.

The admissions practices of universities and the hiring practices of professional firms and big business have slowly extended the reign of meritocracy. The meretricious opening may be less significant for members of the working class, with the notable exception of the strengthening of restraints on discrimination against people defined by the physically inscribed characteristics of race, gender, or handicap. However, working-class men and women may find it harder than ever to

grasp the structure of privilege and inequality in the country. The institutional complexity and regional variety of this structure, its wealth of manifestations and qualifications, keep it from being readily visible.

Faith in the power of the individual to better his or her life is the most prominent element in the American religion of possibility, but it is not the only or even the most important one. That religion also includes something more basic and something more ambitious: a belief in the unlimited potential of practical problem solving and a faith in democracy as a terrain on which ordinary men and women can become strongly defined personalities, in full possession of themselves.

The United States is a country of tinkers. To hold the American religion of possibility is to believe that each of the problems that oppress, weaken, and frighten us as individuals can be confronted, problem by problem, through human effort and ingenuity. Americans resist seeing particular problems as the manifestation of hidden, hard constraints. They believe that the terrors of vast problems yield to the effects of many small solutions.

Use little things to break big things, says Saint Paul, describing an essential feature of the psychology of hope.

For hope is more the consequence of action than its cause. As the experience of the spectator favors fatalism, so the experience of the agent produces hope. A preference for acting over watching has been the most important consequence of the problem-solving attitude.

Social opportunity as a condition and problem solving as an attitude fail to describe the most potent and fundamental strand in the American religion of possibility: *faith in the genius of ordinary men and women*. Walt Whitman, in the secular bible of democracy, *Democratic Vistas*, cited John Stuart Mill's discussion of the twin attributes of a great nation living under liberty, redesccribing them as central ambitions of American democracy: first, a large variety of character and second, full play for human nature to expand itself in numberless and even conflicting directions. The capacity for strong and original experience, rather than being confined to a small number of geniuses, heroes, and eccentrics, should become widespread among ordinary people.

This belief in the elevation of ordinary humanity contrasts with the pressures to conformity that have played so powerful a role in American life. Intolerance of actual difference—difference of experience and

vision—flourished amid the celebration of outward group distinctions. Yet the idea persists that no closed elite enjoys a privileged hold upon the capacity for extraordinary effort, experience, and achievement.

The soul of the ordinary man and woman hides vast recesses of intensity. The sadness of much human life lies in the disproportion between this intensity and the accidental or unworthy objects on which people so often lavish their intense commitments. That this reserve capacity for devotion and obsession can be tapped productively, for the good of the community as well as the individual, has always been a major tenet of the American religion of possibility. Democracy, Americans understand, depends upon *demophilia*, love of the people.

Here we encounter another subtle and paradoxical element of the American faith in the possible. A distrust of collective enthusiasms, especially when they seek to work through the power of government, has always been an integral part of the American faith. Thus, that faith contains a basis for the "countermajoritarian restraints" so famously prized by American constitutional tradition.

Trouble for American democracy and for the American imagination of the possible arises when disappointment with the results of popular democracy leads

to a perversion to which American democracy has often been subject: the effort to use the countermajoritarian power of a judicial elite to impose through judicial law-making what the people through their elected representatives are unwilling to achieve themselves.

There then begins a self-reinforcing cycle of popular political disempowerment. The oppressed minorities or social victims are defined as the wards of a cadre of enlightened and benevolent notables. As politics shrinks in scope and wanes in practical effect, the people lose interest in it and seek to cut their losses. They resist, for example, the substantial tax take required to fund the programs of an activist government. The political incapacity of the people becomes a self-confirming prophecy. What starts as a way to protect the many-sidedness of the future against the single-mindedness of the present ends as an outright expression of *demophobia*, fear of the people.

We shall later ask whether the present constitutional arrangements of the country strike the right balance between demophilic hopes and demophobic anxieties, and strike it in the way most faithful to the American religion of possibility.