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## America's 20-Year Tug-of-War

BY PAUL STARR

It's months before the November elections, and Republicans have practically broken out the champagne to celebrate their coming victories, while many liberals are chalking up prospective losses to the failure of the president and congressional Democrats to be ambitious enough. Excuse me if I don't join in the "precrinations." The elections may turn out badly, but the achievements of the administration's first year and a half have been more than respectable, and I doubt that more progressive policies could have borne fruit quickly enough to alter the results in November. Nor do I believe that Democrats have overreached, only to suffer the predictable reaction from a "center right" society. If the economy were growing smartly, the conservative complaints about too much government would have little resonance.

But the facts are what they are. Most Americans have felt the impact of the recession only since Barack Obama took office, and though they can't hold him responsible for the original meltdown, they also haven't seen the economy come roaring back. "It could have been worse" isn't much of a campaign slogan.

The demographic makeup of the midterm electorate will probably exacerbate the problem. Because of the disproportionate fall in turnout among young and minority voters typically seen in midterm elections, congressional Democrats are especially vulnerable to the losses a president's party normally suffers at this point. Seniors will likely be overrepresented among the voters, and according to surveys, they are the one age group that remains unhappy about the Democrats' greatest achievement—health-care reform.

There is still time for the president to recover by 2012 and win a second term with another congressional majority. But whatever happens, we need a longer view of the political challenges and an appreciation of the deeper forces at work. No party owns this age; every liberal advance is a struggle. Still, if liberals are right about the fundamental realities and what ought to be done about them—and I believe we are—there is every reason to be confident that we will prevail.

## The American Prospect at Twenty

*In this special section, current and former Prospect writers and editors consider the issues that have preoccupied us since our first issue came out in 1990 and assess the state of progressivism today.*

# PAST AND FUTURE

**THE AMERICA THAT WENT TO THE POLLS** in 2008 wanted an escape from recent history. George W. Bush's public-approval ratings had plunged to Nixonian lows, and in the primaries, even Democrats said, in effect, they were tired of the Clintons. The rejection of John McCain in the general election extended the repudiation of the past more broadly. Give us a fresh start, the voters were saying, and what better way to make that point than to elect Obama.

Besides symbolizing a historic break in his very person, Obama promised two things in particular: first, not just an end to the Iraq War but a transformed American image and chance for a new beginning in the very parts of the world that have come to seem most threatening; and second, the possibility of transcending the bitter partisan divisions in domestic politics. In short, a rational and constructive new era, abroad and at home.

But, of course, no president could do all these things, certainly not in two years. We cannot escape from recent history as if it were merely a bad dream. During the campaign, when he wasn't being morphed into Abraham Lincoln, Obama was compared to John F. Kennedy, and as the economic crisis

deepened, the analogies were to Franklin D. Roosevelt. Even as Americans hoped to put recent history behind them, they conjured up impossible historical standards for Obama to meet.

If this pattern were peculiar to the past two years, we could

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ascribe it entirely to the Obama phenomenon. But extreme swings in sentiments about their leaders have become so common among Americans that the pattern invites, if not a clinical diagnosis, then a historical one. Conservatives have had their share of disappointments; George W. Bush, like his father, is now denounced for having enlarged government. And it has been a long time since a Democratic leader lived up to progressives' hopes. But the problem may be the expectations.

Both conservatives and liberals have been looking for a decisive victory in the great political contest of our times. Periodically, one side advances its cause and dares to believe

that it has achieved a definitive political realignment, but its advances turn out to mobilize the opposition more than its own supporters. In the great tug-of-war of the past 20 years, there has been no conclusive move in either direction. For all their unhappiness with the state of the nation, many Americans are nervous about change, entrenched interests buttress the status quo, and there is a dearth of popular movements with any staying power. Rising liberalism among the young and the increasing diversity of society, particularly the growth

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of the Hispanic population, have worked to the advantage of Democrats. But other developments in both international and domestic politics have offset those advantages, at least for a time. As a result, the last two decades present a clear picture, though it is not the picture some of us wanted or expected.

**TWENTY YEARS AGO—THAT HAPPENS TO BE** when we started *The American Prospect*—there were legitimate grounds for believing that the United States was on the cusp of a new liberal era. The collapse of Soviet communism opened a new chapter in world history. Domestically, it seemed, the end of the Cold War would relax the fears that fed right-wing politics and free up revenue and resources previously devoted to defense.

### Reading Progressive History, Through the *Prospect*

BY MARK SCHMITT

For most of the 20-year history of *The American Prospect*, I have been not a writer but a reader of the magazine. When the first issue was published in 1990, I was probably exactly the sort of reader the founders had in mind. In fact, having just been hired as a speechwriter for an ambitious and wonky Democratic senator (Bill Bradley of New Jersey), I got a copy as soon as I could, figuring that immersing myself in the swirl of new ideas about policy and politics could be considered a legitimate part of my new job.

If the goal of the early *Prospect* was to set an ambitious liberal agenda, I hoped to be a cog in the transmission belt between the magazine's ideas and actual policy.

Looking back, it was quite a moment, full of potential and intellectual ferment, with a tangible sense that the Reagan decade had run out of steam (as Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr. argued powerfully in the *Prospect*'s first issue) and that the end of the Cold War had brought a long-delayed opportunity to focus on domestic needs and blunt the

After a decade in power, furthermore, conservatism in 1990 appeared to be exhausted. The *Prospect*'s first issue that spring included an article by Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., “The Liberal Opportunity,” arguing that the history of the 20th century had shown “a fairly regular alternation in American politics between private gain and public good as the dominating motives of national policy.” Progressivism took off in 1901 when Theodore Roosevelt became president, the New Deal arrived with FDR in 1933, and the New Frontier emerged with JFK in 1961. After each liberal era came a more conservative one: the Harding-Coolidge-Hoover 1920s, the Eisenhower 1950s, the Reaganite 1980s. If the rhythm held, Schlesinger argued, the 1992 election could begin another era of liberal advances—that is, if liberals could seize the opportunity that the times presented.

The Democrats did return to power with a young and energetic president, and for a while it looked as if Schlesinger's cycle was playing out as anticipated. Bill Clinton's first budget sharply altered federal priorities, raising the Earned Income Tax Credit for low-wage workers and increasing taxes on the top income bracket. But even though Republican predictions of economic disaster never materialized, and the ensuing prosperity would help re-elect Clinton, his early moves united and energized Republicans, enabling them to win control of Congress in 1994 and prevent Democrats in the '90s from achieving anything comparable to the earlier progressive periods.

Republicans' electoral advantage on national security—a hope summed up in the forgotten term “peace dividend.” Conservatives often cite the last two years of the 1970s, from Republican gains in the 1978 elections through the Reagan victory, as the most exhilarating period in their political life—a frenzy of big ideas and unlimited possibility without the burden of actually implementing those ideas. For progressives, the dawn of the 1990s was similar, although it didn't have quite the same feeling of having hit bottom and starting over. (That would come in 2005 or so.) After all, Democrats—though not progressives or liberals, a crucial difference—controlled the House and Senate and

assumed they always would. Although the party had lost five of the previous six presidential elections, the opportunity to change that record seemed always just around the corner. But how to get around that corner was a subject of vigorous debate within the center-left.

The *Prospect* brought a distinct viewpoint to that debate, one in which lines were clearly defined: The most notable alternative came from the Democratic Leadership Council. These moderate-to-conservative “New Democrats” had launched the Progressive Policy Institute in 1989 with a long essay called “The Politics of Evasion,” by William Galston and Elaine Kamarck. They argued that the

To be sure, the prosperity of the Clinton years looks pretty good now. And if things had turned out differently in Florida in 2000, and Al Gore had been able to build on Clinton's accomplishments, we might see Clinton as having initiated a more substantial progressive era. Instead, the 20 years since 1990 have been an even split: two years of the first Bush followed by eight years of Clinton; eight years of the second Bush followed by two years of Obama.

Despite George W. Bush's failure to win the popular vote in 2000, his election enabled Republicans to entrench themselves in power in three ways. They used the budget surplus they inherited from Clinton for a tax cut for the rich, creating long-term fiscal problems that continue to constrict liberal initiatives. Bush's two Supreme Court appointments solidified the conservative majority among the justices. And when the United States was attacked on September 11, Bush was able to define the response, to capitalize on the ensuing national unity, and to take the

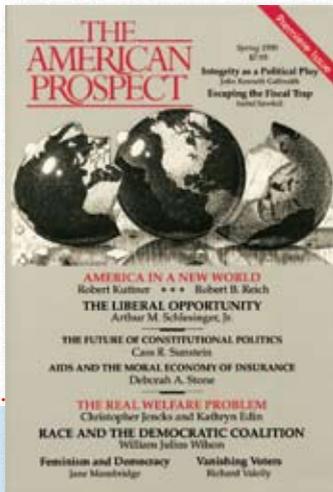
country to war in Iraq under the blanket rubric of the "war on terror." Going to war while cutting taxes was something new in history. Gore's leadership could have used the 9/11 moment for different ends.

Because of the way the Republicans were able to frame it, the war on terrorism has served as the functional equivalent of the Cold

War. Islamism is not comparable to communism; it doesn't represent a general ideological rival to liberal democracy in the United States, Europe, or Latin America. Nonetheless, as the United States has been drawn into wars in distant and unfamiliar places, the war on terrorism has created a domestic political dynamic not unlike that of the Cold War, strengthening the right at the expense of a divided left.

Wars cannot be wished away. After saying that Bush was wrong to go into Iraq without finishing off al-Qaeda in Afghanistan, Obama could not have ended the Afghan War without severe repercussions. Obama may yet succeed; we must hope he does. But America finds itself attempting to do what may simply not be in its power—to deny havens to al-Qaeda and the Taliban in the Af-Pak border region that neither Kabul nor Islamabad have been able to govern.

**TWENTY YEARS AGO, THE STRUGGLE** between liberals and conservatives didn't map as well onto the division between Democrats and Republicans as it does today. Congress included more than a few Republicans who were willing to work with Democrats, as well as Democrats who more than occasionally sided with Republicans. Today the Republicans are far more likely to find partners among the Democrats than the Democrats are to find partners among the Republicans. The polarization of the parties has been asymmetric. While the Democrats include influential moderates (particularly on fiscal issues), the GOP has shifted sharply to the right. Yesterday's conservatives, like Sen. Robert Bennett of Utah, who lost his seat in his own party's caucuses this year, are no longer conservative enough for the party base.



**Premier Issue:** In 1990, the *Prospect* was ready to harness what it detected as a progressive tailwind.

party had not come to terms with the electorate's deep conservatism, especially with worries about crime and welfare, and that neither "liberal fundamentalism" nor more effective mobilization of minorities and low-income voters would overcome that reality.

There were other alternatives as well, and the *Prospect* was engaged with and often critical of them: There were remnants of a movement from the late 1970s called "neoliberalism" (not to be confused with today's use of the term on the left to mean unregu-

lated markets) that proposed revamping liberalism to achieve its goals through technocratic and market-based solutions—the "new ideas" promised in Sen. Gary Hart's 1984 presidential run. (This group was sometimes called "Atari Democrats"—after a computer-game company that was once thought to be the future of the economy.) There were the Wall Street Democrats, whose focus on deficit-reduction and investment-friendly tax policies would be a major challenge to liberalism over the next two decades. All but forgotten were the campus leftists, grassroots activists, and practitioners of "identity politics," long derided as a cause of Democratic defeats.

To a reader, the *Prospect's* "liberal fundamentalism" was straightforward and earnest, a refreshing contrast to all the tortured proposals for "how progressives can win." Much of the debate of the early 1990s came down to the choice between strategy and policy. In 1991, Harris Wofford won a special election in Pennsylvania on a platform of universal health care. The next year, I heard him tell a group of senators, "People think I talked about health care because the polls said I should talk about health care. They didn't. The polls said I had to talk about welfare. But I didn't want to talk about welfare, so I talked about health care." That was the spirit of the early *Prospect*: a dedication to not just

winning elections but to full social and economic justice and an economy that created jobs and opportunity for an expanding middle class.

In those days, the *Prospect* was heavy on pure policy proposals, with graphs, tables, and footnotes. (One of the proposals, by economist Barry Bluestone and several colleagues to create a fund that individuals could tap for college loans and lifelong retraining, formed the basis for the first policy project on which I worked.) The assumption, it seemed, was that good policies that "benefit all citizens," as sociologist Theda Skocpol put it in a 1990 *Prospect* article, would result in political support from the citizens who benefited. "Integrity is

With the far right holding the dwindling number of GOP moderates in check, Obama never had a chance of transcending partisan divisions. It wasn't unwise of him to express that aim, which corresponded to a widely felt hope. During the post-World War II period when Republicans accepted much of the New Deal, and the ideological differences between the parties narrowed, Americans became accustomed to bipartisanship, and liberalism occupied the center. But the Republicans aren't interested in continuing that tradition of cooperation, and America's political

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institutions afford plenty of opportunity for obstruction. Not only do the constitutional checks and balances make change difficult; the status-quo bias in our institutions is all the greater now that the use of the Senate filibuster has become routine.

Together, the evolution of America's parties and political institutions create the basis for a historic impasse—which is why health-care reform and financial regulation have been such notable achievements. Yet as important as those are, fiscally conservative Democrats have been able to combine with Republicans to hobble economic policy, block a second stimulus, and risk a double-dip recession. Although different policies probably wouldn't have made enough of a difference this fall, they could be devastating in 2012 if the recession persists.

surprisingly sound policy" for winning elections, John Kenneth Galbraith declared in the *Prospect's* first issue.

But few politicians shared the clarity of Galbraith, Woford, or Sen. Paul Wellstone, elected the year the *Prospect* was founded and to this day an icon of the idea that unapologetic liberalism can win elections. Most politicians treated the great battle of ideas as a kind of menu from which to pick and choose as convenient, and none chose more omnivorously than Bill Clinton. His election put the airy debate over policy versus strategy into the realm of political reality, where the *Prospect* was often disappointed—by Clinton, when he chose deficit reduction and

later welfare reform over liberal alternatives, and by Congress, when it failed to pass health reform in 1993.

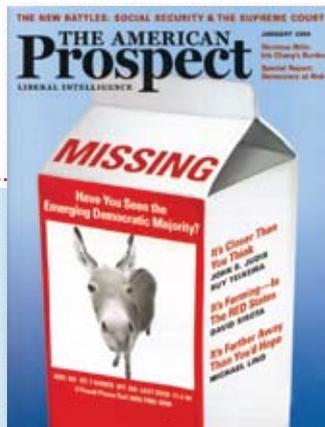
The greater disappointment came when the hopes for progressive resurgence were destroyed by the conservative comeback in the 1994 election. And so for the remaining six years of a Democratic presidency, and then eight of George W. Bush's—two-thirds of the *Prospect's* short history—we lived with not only the continued drama of government shutdowns, impeachments, deadlocked elections, corruption, and wars launched on deception but also the sobering reality of a government that was overwhelmingly conservative, with little opportunity

In the article he wrote for the *Prospect's* first issue, Schlesinger observed that many people believe politics is about power, while others think it is about image, and he granted there is some truth in both of those views. But in a democracy, he continued, politics is "above all about the search for remedy."

The Democrats will lose ground this year because they've failed to provide economic remedies fast enough. But the long-run problem for Republicans is that remedy is not what they have been offering—not for health care, for which they barely

offer even the pretense of a solution; not for the recession, which their ideas would aggravate; not for immigration, one of several issues they want to exploit without facing up to the facts; not for climate change, which many of them entirely deny; not for energy, where their

favorite response, as summed up in the chant, "Drill, baby, drill," was drowned in the Gulf oil spill. Events like the financial collapse and the oil spill keep reminding people that they need a competent and activist government to rein in the market. Unless conservatives abandon ideological fantasy and denial and become a responsible partner in government, progressives will dominate the search for remedy. And if that is what political tug-of-war is all about, we will ultimately win it. **TAP**



**Movement Watch:** The search for a sign of an emerging Democratic majority has been ongoing, making the cover in January 2005 and July/August 2007.

for progressive policy ideas to be heard. Public opinion and demographic change augured an alternative future, such as that foreseen in Ruy Teixeira and John Judis' 2000 book, *The Emerging Democratic Majority*—an argument that I was reminded recently, the *Prospect* had published five times before it was proved correct in 2008.

Those optimistic predictions didn't change the brutal

realities of government. The mission of the *Prospect* quite naturally shifted during this period from questioning what kind of liberal vision should prevail to understanding the conservative challenge, detailing its excesses, and helping to develop both an alternative set of policies and a vision of justice that had been lost.

As we all struggled to understand the powerful hold of the conservative move-