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## WILSON CENTER PAPERS

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*Summaries of key reports given at Wilson Center meetings*

### **“Progressivism: A Modern Reassessment.”**

Paper by Richard L. McCormick, presented at a seminar sponsored by the Wilson Center's Program on American Society and Politics, Feb. 3, 1982.

Michael J. Lacey, moderator.

Among historians, interest in the American Progressives of the early 1900s has waned. One reason, suggests McCormick, a Rutgers historian, may be a disillusionment among scholars with liberal reform movements in general—from the Progressives' efforts to minister to (i.e., mold in their own image) poor immigrants to later excesses of the Great Society.

In a seminar at the Wilson Center, McCormick assessed the welter of early 20th-century reform efforts affecting public health, criminal justice, election practices, worker safety, housing, education, and liquor sales. He also reflected on the dissatisfaction that liberal reformers seem inevitably to generate, even among their sympathizers.

Between 1904 and 1906, many Americans were stunned by muckraking journalists' revelations of massive corruption in business and politics—local, state, and national. They responded with an outpouring of reformist sentiment that reached every corner of public life. It was, says McCormick, “the first (perhaps the only) reform movement to be experienced by the whole American nation.”

Uniting the diverse crusaders were anger at big business (combined with an acceptance of industrialization) and faith in “social engineering,” whether undertaken by volunteer associations or by government. They also shared a faith in economics, sociology, and psychology and an evangelical drive “to purge the world of sin.”

Yet, reforms rarely accomplished their intended goals. In an effort to weaken political party machines, for instance, activists pushed through state laws replacing nominating conventions with direct primary elections. But low voter interest in the primaries in effect returned control of candidate selection to party bosses. Administrative agencies were set up to regulate industry—between 1905 and 1907, 15 state railroad commissions were established. But businessmen soon discovered it was even easier to draft regulatory policy in the offices of key administrators than in legislative halls.

The Progressives' faith in scientific methods should have been tempered, notes McCormick, by examining one element inherent in those methods—the availability of hard data by which to measure progress. The numbers documented “just how far short of success their programs sometimes fell.”

Whatever their motives—an honest desire to make society more just, a craving for the power to impose “right forms of behavior on the masses”—the Progressives failed to judge their programs by the standards they themselves had set. Like the architects of the Great Society some 50 years later, they had promised more than their experiments could deliver. Then they “covered up,” declaring America's social difficulties “solved through expertise and government.”

Yet, if the Progressives often failed to find solutions, they had put their

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finger on the problem confronting America in the 20th century. And this, concludes McCormick, was perhaps their greatest accomplishment—to recognize that America was no longer as homogeneous as it had once been,

“that diverse cultural and occupational groups had conflicting interests and that the responsibility for mitigating . . . those differences lay with the whole society, usually the government.”

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### “The Limits of Reform in China.”

Conference sponsored by the Wilson Center’s East Asia Program, May 3, 1982. Ronald A. Morse, moderator.

Five years after Beijing’s pragmatic new leadership embarked on its “Four Modernizations”—in agriculture, industry, defense, and science and technology—the obstacles to change in China are becoming apparent, according to the six papers presented at this Wilson Center conference. Among them are China’s massive bureaucracy, the regime’s reluctance to give up Soviet-style central planning, and fears among the citizenry after the Cultural Revolution.

Party deputy chairman Deng Xiaoping has rehabilitated 2.9 million cadres (bureaucrats)—all victims of purges since 1957—to provide political support for the shift from revolution to economic development. The Chinese bureaucracy now numbers 18 million civil servants—one cadre for every 50 people. Most have little to do. In the summer of 1981, 40 percent of Beijing’s 600,000 state cadres were on vacation simultaneously without affecting normal operations. And only half the cadres have more than a middle-school education, leaving them poorly equipped to lead a technological revolution.

In agriculture, reformers are trying to dismantle the commune system and to emphasize the profit motive and family farming. Middle-level bureaucrats, whose power would wane, and wealthier communes are resisting. At the same time, “overexuberance” among China’s 100 million abjectly

poor peasants is arousing second thoughts in Beijing. Since late 1981, according to University of Michigan political scientist David Zweig, peasants have taken over public orchards and farms and stripped collective factories of machinery for private use without official permission.

In industry, replacing production quotas with the profit yardstick in some 40 percent of state-owned firms has made little difference. Beijing still fixes prices and wages and allocates capital, supplies, and workers among factories. Bureaucrats thus have little incentive to change inefficient habits of administration. In any case, there are few Chinese who can show them how. Only 20,000 students attend finance and accounting colleges—so few that it will take 76 years to provide one graduate for every state-owned firm.

Chinese scientists and intellectuals, meanwhile, have been restored to high status and called upon to help revitalize the nation. But they are reluctant to initiate change lest they suffer for it—as they did during the Cultural Revolution—when the political winds shift.

Beijing recently revived the Confucian edict, “Seek truth from facts.” But as Wesleyan University’s Vera Schwarz observes, “Neither the government nor the intellectuals seem certain as to which truths may be glimpsed from what kinds of facts.”

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**“The Iranian Revolution and the Islamic Republic:  
New Assessments.”**

Conference sponsored by the Wilson Center’s Program on History, Culture and Society, May 21–22, 1982. Nikki Keddie, moderator.

Elevated to political pre-eminence by the 1978–79 Revolution, the Iranian clergy may continue to run their nation after Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini dies. But opposition to a theocracy from top-ranking clergymen and disillusioned laymen could result in a major power struggle. Eighteen journalists, economists, historians, and political scientists—all specialists on Iranian affairs—met to discuss Iran’s prospects at a Wilson Center conference. The conference was coordinated by Nikki Keddie, a Wilson Center Guest Scholar and UCLA historian.

Iran’s republican government is headed by the *Faqih* (now Khomeini), the nation’s highest legal authority, supreme over executive, legislative, and judicial branches. Though the 1979 constitution provides that Khomeini be replaced as *Faqih* by a Leadership Council composed of three to five men, Khomeini has indicated his interest in a single successor. But his choice, a former student and long-time friend, Ayatollah Hussein Ali Montazeri, may be passed over.

Unlike Khomeini, Montazeri is not an *ayatollah ozma* (grand ayatollah). Of the six current *ayatollah ozma*, Khomeini alone favors clerical control of politics. No *ayatollah*—the term refers to 100 or so religious and legal scholars at the top of the Islamic

hierarchy—is considered infallible. Surviving *ayatollahs* could easily repudiate Khomeini after he dies.

Khomeini’s clerical support comes not from the *ayatollahs*, but from 50,000 to 80,000 *mollas* (preachers) and *tullab* (seminary students). Most Iranians disdain the *mollas* as greedy hypocrites and reserve their respect for the *ayatollahs*. The *mollas* could lose their political influence if leading *ayatollahs* challenge their views openly.

If the *mollas* are to retain power, they will have to solve other problems, as well. They are already divided among themselves, and Khomeini’s death may drive them into open strife. Moreover, many lower- and middle-class Iranians believe that the Revolution has not brought the promised justice and prosperity. Left-wing secular groups will try to exploit this dissatisfaction. Meanwhile, various exile factions, monarchist and “republican leftist,” seek to overthrow the regime.

Recalling the country’s volatile 20th-century history—from the constitutional revolution of 1905–11 to the national movement led by Mohammad Mosaddeq during the 1950s—one conference speaker noted, “It is not to be imagined that the current phase of Iranian history is any more permanent than earlier ones.”