historical circumstances, wrote the *Encyclopædia Britannica*; in the fifth book of the *Wealth of Nations*, he had recognized the need for government interference. Likewise, Alfred Fouillée dismissed the "laissé-faireists' economism"; Smith had meant nothing of the sort.\(^5^2\)

The Fabian socialist Beatrice Webb mused over the irony of it all: "The Political Economy of Adam Smith was the scientific expression of the impassioned crusade of the 18th century against class tyranny and the oppression of the Many by the Few. By what silent revolution of events, by what unselfconscious transformation of thought, did it change itself into the 'Employers' Gospel' of the 19th century?"\(^5^3\)

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**Chapter Eight**

Liberalism Becomes the American Creed

*In the United States at this time liberalism is not only the dominant but even the sole intellectual tradition.*

—Lionel Trilling, 1950

**How did liberalism** become such a key and ubiquitous term in the American political vocabulary? The *Encyclopædia Americana* of 1831 did not contain an entry on liberalism, and the one on "liberal" explained that its political meaning came from France. Only half a century later did liberalism receive an entry in the American *Cyclopaedia of Political Science*, and it was a translation of a French article that equated liberalism with the "principles of 89." During the closing years of the nineteenth century, "liberalism" remained a rare word in the language of American politics and, when it was used, it was most often to designate a European, if not French, cluster of ideas.

How, then, did liberalism become so Americanized? According to the noted intellectual and political commentator Walter Lippman, the word first came into common usage thanks to a
group of reformers who were Republican Progressives in 1912 and Wilsonian Democrats from around 1916. It is indicative that Woodrow Wilson called himself “progressive” in 1916 and “liberal” in 1917. But what did the president mean? What did being liberal mean to Wilson?

By 1917, the meaning of the term had evolved significantly from its origins in the French Revolution and its century-long association with French political developments. Toward the end of the nineteenth century, the French influence had receded and German ideas were exerting a growing influence.

In England, this led to the conception of “new liberalism.” Thanks largely to the travails of the British Liberal Party, liberal newspapers, and liberal theorists like Leonard Hobhouse, this new form of liberalism spread, and by the second decade of the twentieth century, its advocates felt secure enough to drop the “new” and just call it liberalism. Herbert Samuel’s liberal handbook, published in 1902 with an introduction by future prime minister H. H. Asquith, was titled Liberalism: An Attempt to State the Principles and Proposals of Contemporary Liberalism in England. Lyon Blease, another Liberal Party politician, published a book in 1913 simply titled Short History of English Liberalism. It was this liberalism that was imported into America around 1914–17 by Republican Progressives and Wilsonian Democrats.

Herbert Croly, one of most influential public intellectuals of the Progressive movement and cofounder of the flagship progressive magazine the New Republic in 1914, was one of those responsible for dissemination of the term in America. His enormously influential book, The Promise of American Life of 1909, delivered a stinging indictment of laissez-faire economics and a strong argument for government intervention. It is more than likely that Croly adopted the term to show solidarity with the liberal government and liberal thinkers in Britain, with whom he sympathized. By 1914 Croly had begun calling his own ideas liberal, and by mid-1916 the term was in common use in the New Republic as another way to describe progressive legislation. After all, as Woodrow Wilson explained in his Constitutional Government in the United States of 1908, Americans “borrowed our whole political language from England.”

A Liberal Empire

President Wilson may also have been one of the first Americans to use the word “liberal” to describe a certain foreign policy agenda. During his famous Peace without Victory address in January 1917, he claimed to be “speaking for liberals and friends of humanity.” While en route to the Paris Peace conference to sell his Fourteen Points, he declared that “liberalism is the only thing that can save civilization from chaos.”

Of course, liberalism had always been about more than domestic politics. From Lafayette, who boasted that liberalism was a vast movement radiating outward from France, to those who feared a “universal liberalism” with reverberations as far away as India, the idea of spreading liberalism internationally had a long history, at least some of which President Wilson was surely aware. On his way to Paris, he visited Genoa and paid tribute to Mazzini in front of his monument. Wilson professed to have studied Mazzini’s writings closely and to have derived guidance from them. The president added that with the end of the First World War, he hoped to contribute to “the realization of the ideals to which his [Mazzini’s] life and thought were devoted.”

Wilson most likely also knew that liberalism was closely intertwined with the idea of empire. Many of the British liberals with whom American progressives sympathized spoke of empire as a way of spreading liberal values around the world.
Indeed, many of them saw no contradiction in approving of empire and while at the same time believing that “the root principle of Liberalism [was] a passionate attachment to the ideal of self-government.” Empire was a “truly liberal foreign policy” that would spread civilization and the “arts of government” around the world.6

It may seem curious today that they spoke this way about empire when they simultaneously denounced “imperialism.” To take just one example, John Hobson, in a highly revered book on imperialism, called it a “disease” spread by economic parasites who preyed on the poor. The liberal statesman Robert Lowe called it the very “apoplexy of violence . . . the oppression of the weak by the strong, and the triumph of power over justice.”77

In Britain, during the election campaign of 1872 that pitted the Tory Benjamin Disraeli against the liberal William Gladstone, the subject of empire became highly politicized. Liberals repeatedly accused Disraeli of imperialism in a concerted attempt to besmirch and defame him. In return, Disraeli exploited the empire’s popularity with the British people to denigrate the liberals. He suggested that they were weak and unpatriotic and could not be trusted with safekeeping Britain’s colonies. Liberals, he warned, would ruin the empire. In his famous Crystal Palace speech of June 24, the aspiring prime minister claimed that throughout British history there “has been no effort so continuous, so subtle, supported by so much energy, and carried on with so much ability and acumen as the attempts of Liberalism to effect the disintegration of the Empire.”

Disraeli’s rhetoric was clearly a winning tactic. During his premiership, he engineered the purchase of the Suez Canal shares, took his government into Egyptian affairs, supported Turkey against Russia, and adopted an aggressive stance in both southern Africa and Afghanistan. In 1876, he proclaimed Queen Victoria empress of India. Liberals vehemently attacked his imperialism. It was hypocritical, immoral, and contrary to British values.

It is easy to misinterpret these liberal denunciations of imperialism without an understanding of the word games involved. As curious as it may seem to us today, it was entirely possible for British liberals to denounce imperialism while favoring “genuine colonialism.” The terms did not mean the same thing.

The word “imperialism,” like so many other isms, had been introduced into political discourse as a pejorative. It was used to vilify despots like Napoleon III and Bismarck and shared certain characteristics with Caesarism, which, as we know, was coined around the same time. Consider, for example, an article in the *Fortnightly Review* in 1878 carrying the telling title “What Does Imperialism Mean?” Its author explained that it meant the exertion of brute force over others. It was founded on selfishness and a complete disregard for moral duty.

Imperialists like Napoleon and Bismarck, it was frequently said, used the allure of empire to divert the attention of their poorer populations from the need for reform at home, while they increased their own power and allowed a small group of supporters to amass wealth at the expense of the public. In other words, imperialism was one of the ways in which dictators, in cahoots with aristocracy, plundered society and, by harnessing the support of the ignorant mob, tried to stop or even reverse liberal reforms. By accusing Disraeli of imperialism, British liberals were thus suggesting that he was deliberately misleading the public to further his own interests, those of the Crown and the English aristocracy. To make matters worse, he was appealing to the public’s basest instincts in pursuit of his goals. His imperialism was called un-English; it was a pernicious form of Caesarism.
But such statements should not be taken to mean that liberals wished to disband their empire. To disapprove of one kind of empire did not necessarily mean disapproving of another. Gladstone spoke well of an empire that allowed for self-government and contrasted such an empire with what he called the selfish form of empire advocated by Disraeli. He could oppose imperialism but favor colonies.

Gladstone did not oppose the projection of British power and influence; he just professed to oppose the use of violence that often accompanied it. (His record as prime minister during the 1880s shows that he hardly lived up to these sentiments, however, as his armed intervention in Egypt in 1882 illustrates.) He believed that the British had a duty to spread their civilization and therefore the right to do so. About British rule over Indians, Gladstone said, “It is them and their interests that we are defending, even more, and far more, than our own.” Many liberals agreed. The Manchester Guardian stated that “imperialism stands, as it has always stood, for the humanitarian principles, for justice to the more backward people in India and Africa under our control, for fair dealing with foreign peoples, weak or strong, and for a helping hand for those who are struggling for a freedom which we have long since won for ourselves.”

American admirers of Gladstone concurred that countries like their own had a mission to colonize. They should not, however, follow what one writer called “the path of barbarism.” In the 1890s, Charles Norton, editor of the North American Review, denounced the arrogance, militarism, and selfishness that underpinned imperialism. He admired Gladstone, whom he thought was the proponent of a truly “liberal foreign policy.” American publications like the Nation and Harper’s seconded such views. To them, Disraeli was seducing supporters with appeals to a wrong-minded form of national glory, all the while distracting the British people’s attention away from pressing domestic issues. It seemed clear to Disraeli’s critics that the main objective of his imperialism was to divert people from problems at home through aggrandizement abroad.

Key liberal theorists like Hobson and Hobhouse also differentiated between good and bad forms of empire, between the positive “genuine colonialism” and base “imperialism.” Imperialism, they said, benefited only a small group of “economic parasites,” while it provided no long-term benefits for the lower classes. It diverted their attention from the need for reform at home.

Both men also argued that there was a better form of empire, namely one that furthered the “civilization of the world.” It did so by promoting the improvement and elevation of the character of the people under control. Like other liberals, they defended settler colonialism, which they both took to be a noncoercive and voluntary arrangement for mutual benefit. The goal, said Hobson, was “the elevation of humanity.” Colonialism was genuine and benevolent if “it extend[ed] the bounds of civilisation, and lift[ed] the level of material and moral conduct in the world.” For James Fitzjames Stephen, the liberal judge, scholar, and member of the Colonial Council in India, who helped to frame and pass many legal reforms there, liberalism meant fulfilling an obligation to rule justly and to spread European civilization to the governed. This meant bringing peace, order, and law to India. Joseph Chamberlain explained that Britain’s empire could be justified only if it made the people happy and improved their prospects.

Virtually all European advocates of empire—whether British, French, or German—believed that it would spread civilization and that Europeans had both a right and a duty to do just that. In France they spoke of a mission civilisatrice; in Germany the spreading of Kultur. Americans of course had their White Man’s Burden. Last but not least, liberals frequently
said that genuine colonialism would teach the lower races “the arts of government.” The central principle of liberalism, wrote Hobhouse, was self-government,¹³ and genuine colonialism should spread this principle around the world. Liberals frequently said that England was seeking to teach her native subjects to be self-dependent and to give them “in the fullness of time, and under the aegis of her own flag, a new and a better freedom.”¹⁴ This is also what it meant to spread civilization.

Somewhat paradoxically, Europeans also believed that the acquisition of empire would civilize and moralize their own populations. It would do so by turning unemployed and degenerate urban workers from Europe into productive farmers, thus making them more healthy, manly, and patriotic. Herbert Samuel believed that the empire fostered the “ennoblement of the [English] race.”¹⁵ In France, it was thought that colonies would encourage large families and thereby be a remedy for the country’s declining birthrate, a pressing problem after its defeat in the Franco-Prussian War. Acquiring an empire would also go a long way toward restoring the country’s honor.¹⁶

Such lofty words cannot mask the fact that liberals often whitewashed horrific violence. Even settler colonialism frequently involved the expropriation of property and cruelty. Many liberals were well aware of the atrocities being committed,¹⁷ but seem to have chosen to denounce them and move on rather than seeking an end to empire. Samuel argued that despite the “occasional abuse of power,” on balance empire was a force for good. One shouldn’t take the missteps out of proportion.¹⁸ In France, political economist Charles Gide suggested that European colonizers should confess their past sins and try to do better in the future. It was the duty of a great people like the French to colonize, but it should be done lovingly and peacefully.

Racialization of the Anglo-Saxon Myth

Pro-colonial liberal discourse was saturated with overtly racist language. References to the “lower races,” “subject races,” and “barbarian races” abound. And although the purpose of genuine colonialism was ostensibly to promote their self-government, how long such lower races should expect to wait until they were permitted to govern themselves was often left vague. It depended on the level of their social development, how far they had been “civilized.” “A barbarian race may prosper best if for a period, even for a long period, it surrenders the right of self-government in exchange for the teachings of civilization,” wrote Samuel. It would happen “in the fullness of time.”¹⁹

Since the very beginning, liberals had linked the right to vote to the possession of “capacity.” Although women were often said to lack capacity for reasons of biology, when it came to men it was more often described as something that could, at least in principle, be gained. If you made enough money, acquired the requisite education and leisure time, you could acquire the vote.

During the last decades of the nineteenth century, this changed. Political capacity became progressively racialized and transformed into a matter of heredity. To a significant number of influential liberals, the capacity to vote now became the exclusive property of the “Anglo-Saxon race,” sometimes also referred to as the “Teutonic race.”

The Anglo-Saxon myth was, of course, centuries old. The legend held that England owed its notions of freedom and self-government to German tribes who had migrated from the forests of Germany to England in the early Middle Ages. It was widely disseminated in the nineteenth century, including by liberals such as Madame de Staël, in On Germany, and by writers of the Staatss-Lexikon. In fact, many liberals continued
to believe that the “Saxons” had brought to Britain their spirit of independence and knowledge of self-government. The Magna Carta and Bill of Rights, they said, were only a development of the “germs of liberty” brought to England by the German tribes.

In most of these instances, however, the term “Anglo-Saxon” referred mainly to a cultural inheritance. The tribes had brought their ideas, values, or a certain spirit to England. Now, during the closing years of the nineteenth century, the meaning of the word began to change. Under the impact of “race science,” it came increasingly to designate a matter of biological heredity. John Burgess, founder of the Political Science Quarterly and one of the most influential political scientists of his period, wrote that the United States, Great Britain, and Germany—the “three great Teutonic powers”—shared not only an ethical and political bond, but a racial one. “If Great Britain is our motherland,” he wrote, then “Germany is the motherland of our motherland.”

It is important, of course, not to oversimplify or generalize. The word “race” still had somewhat of a muddled meaning. Sometimes it appears to have been used as a simple synonym for “English-speaking,” suggesting that, at least theoretically, once the colonized races learned English and were civilized, they would no longer be inferior. But sources also show that it was often assumed that white areas of the world would be more easy to civilize than others. In fact, nonwhite areas might never reach the level of civilization required for self-government.

Anglo-Saxons, on the other hand, were thought to have a special aptitude for democracy. Anglo-Saxon men, it was often said, were the possessors of superior political genius and therefore particularly well suited to teach the world good government. It is what entitled them to rule those parts of the world inhabited by the “unpolitical and barbaric races.” It was their mission and manifest destiny to rule the world. World domination was “the birthright of the Anglo-Saxon race.”

If the Anglo-Saxon race occupied the top of the political capacity ladder, the black or “barbaric races” always occupied the bottom rung. Black skin, wrote Burgess, meant “membership in a race of men which has never of itself succeeded in subjecting passion to reason, has never, therefore, created any civilization of any kind.” Even more stunningly, in his History of American Political Theories, the progressive historian Charles Merriam wrote that “Barbaric races, if incapable, may be swept away,” and that “such action violates no rights of these populations which are not petty and trifling in comparison with its transcendent right and duty to establish political and legal order everywhere.”

From an Anglo-Saxon to an Anglo-American Liberal Empire

Some began to say that the superior political capacities of the Anglo-Saxons meant that they should cooperate in bringing their civilization and culture to other parts of the world. On this issue, a bond grew between Britain and the United States during the period leading up to World War I. Many Americans were moved by Gladstone’s 1878 article in the North American Review, titled “Kin beyond the Sea,” in which the British prime minister proposed a rapprochement between the two countries in the interest of world peace, prosperity, and “self-government.” Gladstone called their Constitution “the most wonderful work ever struck off at a given time by the brain and purpose of man” and praised America’s “splendid service to the general cause of popular government throughout the world.” Soon, he predicted, the United States would surpass all other countries in wealth and power.
Stressing the resemblances between the two nations’ forms of government, and their shared commitment to the principle of self-government, Gladstone noted that England and America would shortly be the two most powerful nations in the world. They should use their combined strength for the “highest purposes.” They were the “two greater branches of a race born to command.” Together, they would combat savagery and inhumanity while bringing peace, progress, and prosperity to the world. Having acquired great power, they had also acquired great responsibility to help advance the cause of civilization.24

Some went further, suggesting not only cooperation but the actual merging of Britain and America into “one confederacy . . . governed by a race speaking the same language, of superior intellect and energy.”25 Andrew Carnegie, in an essay published in the North American Review, spoke of a “Re-United States,” a “race confederacy” that would dominate the world through its moral ascendancy.26 Another author in the same journal suggested that Britain should create “a new United States of the World.”27

With a considerable amount of trepidation, the idea of an Anglo-Saxon imperial superiority was recognized abroad. The sensationalist work by the French pedagogue Edmond Demolins, titled Where Does the Superiority of the Anglo-Saxons Come From? (1897), triggered heated debate—and even a sense of panic—in France. Demolins produced statistics with which he predicted a world in which American, Canadian, South African, Australian, and English products would swamp all markets unless France reformed itself along Anglo-Saxon lines. Prominent writers responded to the book with equally polemical articles and books.28 Those who believed in the superiority of Anglo-Saxon mores were always in a minority, but they had a considerable impact on French political thinking at the time, intensifying the perceived need for positive eugenics.

As World War I approached, American and British liberals increasingly felt the need to distinguish themselves and their political traditions from Germany. In a series of articles for the New Republic in 1915, philosopher and essayist George Santayana expounded on the differences between the British and German notions of freedom. England, he explained, had parliamentary government, whereas in Germany government was bureaucratic and authoritarian. In Germany the government promulgated sets of rules regarding the conduct of individuals toward each other and then compelled individuals to observe them. In Britain individuals were free to make their own decisions. The future would decide whether German or English notions of freedom would win.29

This trend was only magnified as the First World War approached and the menace of authoritarianism became more palpable. During the war itself, anti-German hostility grew. As the California Board of Education argued when it banned the teaching of the German language in public schools, German culture was steeped in “the ideals of autocracy, brutality, and hatred.” Wartime propaganda personified the enemy as the “Prussian cur” and “the German beast.”30 The terms “Anglo-American” and “English-Speaking” increasingly replaced “Anglo-Saxon.”

After the war, there was considerable embarrassment over the idea that there could be racial bond between Germany and America, or that American political thought might owe something of importance to Germany. Irving Fisher made sure to distance American traditions from German ones in his presidential address to the American Economic Association in December 1918, a speech that was then published in the
American Economic Review. As we know, the American Economic Association had been founded by a group of Americans who had studied in Germany and came back full of ideas about how the state could help the poor.

In his speech, Fisher acknowledged the importance of German political economy to the formation of the association. He added, however, that its members had now come to the realization that German economics had served a “criminal” state. It would be better, he concluded, for Americans to borrow from English economics, which was more liberal, more democratic, and healthier for the world.31

World War I thus tightened the sense of an Anglo-American alliance, and Germany’s contribution to the history of liberalism was progressively forgotten or pushed aside. Soon the French contribution would be minimized too. Meanwhile liberalism, democracy, and Western civilization became virtually synonymous, and America, because of its rising strength, was cast as their principal defender.

The equation between liberalism and America was further solidified and disseminated through Western civilization courses that were invented after the war and taught on US college campuses. Their purpose was to teach students what America had fought for in the Great War and what the country stood for.

During the 1920s and 1930s, European fascists, Nazis, and their progenitors and supporters agreed that liberalism was closely intertwined with Western civilization, democracy, and America, and it was precisely because of this that they defined themselves against it. Prominent German intellectuals, like Oswald Spengler, Friedrich Junger, Carl Schmitt, and Moeller van den Bruck, denounced liberalism as a foreign philosophy and the very antithesis of German culture. Liberalism, they said, was Germany’s archenemy, which is why the patron saint of National Socialism Moeller van den Bruck so happily claimed, incorrectly of course, that “there are no liberals in Germany today.”32 It is also why the Italian dictator Benito Mussolini held up fascism as the very “negation of liberalism,”33 while Adolf Hitler declared that the chief goal of Nazism was “to abolish the liberalistic concept of the individual.”34

Of course the claim that liberalism was somehow un-German was completely false, as this book has shown. The contention was forcefully refuted by the antifascist Italian writer Guido de Ruggiero in his History of European Liberalism of 1925. Ruggiero wrote that the crisis of liberalism (also the title of the epilogue) should not be taken to mean that there was no European liberal tradition. His book devoted a chapter each to Italian, German, and French liberalism to make his point. He did however admit that the “Anglo-Saxon” version of liberalism was stronger.

It is a curious fact that it was only in the late 1930s that liberalism as a political philosophy began to appear in American textbooks. George Sabine’s A History of Political Theory, published in the 1930s, and used in most American undergraduate and graduate programs at the time, was the first major US textbook to discuss it. He described it as a British 19th century tradition and worried that it was a diminishing force.

The Second World War only fortified and spread the view of America as the prime representative and defender of liberalism, democracy, and Western civilization, which by now in many people’s minds were virtually the same thing. Henry Luce’s famous editorial “The American Century,” which appeared in the February 17, 1941 issue of Life, called for “the most powerful and vital nation in the world” to assume world leadership. “We are the inheritors of all the great principles of Western Civilization,” Luce wrote. “It now becomes our time to be the powerhouse.”
The Question of Government Intervention

It would be wrong to conclude from the growing association of liberalism with America that there was a consensus over what the word actually meant: how, for example, liberalism differed from democracy, or what it meant in terms of a government’s role in the economy. While the progressives around the New Republic called themselves liberal, so did Herbert Hoover, but he meant something different. Sounding quite like Herbert Spencer, Hoover, who served as president of the United States from 1929 to 1933, insisted that liberalism’s main concern was the protection of individual freedom. It stood for the idea that government should involve itself as little as possible in the economy. As president, Hoover oversaw the stock market crash of 1929 and the onset of the Great Depression. Despite the economic catastrophe, he continued to defend the laissez-faire version of liberalism well into the 1940s.

In continental Europe, powerful voices continued to spread the idea that liberalism meant laissez-faire. Those who meant something else had to add a qualifier such as “progressive” or “constructive” or speak of “liberal socialism.” In his book Liberalism, published in 1927, the influential Austrian economist Ludwig von Mises lamented the disputes over the meaning of the word. True liberalism, he insisted, was not about any humanitarian objectives, however noble they might be. Liberalism had nothing else in mind than the advancement of a people’s material welfare. Its central concepts were private property, freedom and peace. Anything beyond that was “socialism,” for which Mises had only disdain. Those who thought that liberalism had something to do with spreading humanity and magnanimity were “pseudo liberals.”

Soon, however, the American philosopher John Dewey entered the fray, and put in a herculean effort to seal the progressive meaning of the term once and for all. Dewey received his doctorate in 1884 at Johns Hopkins University, where he studied under Richard Ely. In 1914, he became a regular contributor to the New Republic. Over the course of his long career, he taught mainly at the University of Chicago and Columbia and published over forty books and several hundred articles.

In the 1930s Dewey published numerous articles carrying titles such as “The Meaning of Liberalism,” “The Meaning of the Term: Liberalism,” “A Liberal Speaks Out for Liberalism,” and “Liberalism and Civil Liberties”; there was also his book, Liberalism and Social Action, published in 1935.

According to Dewey, there were “two streams” of liberalism. One was more humanitarian and therefore open to government intervention and social legislation. The other was beholden to big industry, banking, and commerce and was therefore committed to laissez-faire. But American liberalism, he wrote, had nothing whatsoever to do with laissez-faire, and never had. Nor did it have anything to do with the “gospel of individualism.” American liberalism stood for “liberality and generosity, especially of mind and character.” Its aim was to promote greater equality and to combat plutocracy with the aid of government.

The person most responsible for making this meaning of liberalism dominant in America was Franklin Delano Roosevelt, president from 1933 to 1945. Like so many liberals before him, Roosevelt claimed the moral high ground for liberalism. Liberals, he said, believed in generosity and social mindedness. They were willing to sacrifice for the public good. Over the course of his years in office, President Roosevelt spoke often of the importance of human cooperation. The faith of a liberal, he said, was a belief in the effectiveness of people helping each other.

Roosevelt also solidified a link between Liberalism and the Democratic Party. He distinguished between this “liberal
party," which favored government intervention, and a "conservative party," which did not. The liberal party, he said, believes that "as new conditions and problems arise beyond the power of men and women to meet as individuals, it becomes the duty of the Government itself to find new remedies with which to meet them.""The conservative party," by contrast, believes that "there is no necessity for the Government to step in." The Democratic Party, he said, was the liberal party while the Republican Party was conservative.39

To emphasize the point, in his speech nominating Roosevelt as the Democratic candidate for the presidency in 1944, Henry Agard Wallace, who served as vice president from 1941 to 1945, secretary of commerce from 1945 to 1946, and editor of the New Republic from 1946 to 1947, used the word "liberal" no fewer than fifteen times, in one instance calling the president the "greatest liberal in the history of the United States."40

Roosevelt's meaning of the word was close to that of the British economist, social reformer, and member of the Liberal Party William Beveridge. Beveridge authored the so-called Beveridge Report of 1942, which served as the basis for the post–World War II British welfare state. In a 1945 pamphlet titled Why I Am a Liberal, he declared, "Liberty means more than freedom from the arbitrary power of Governments. It means freedom from economic servitude to Want and Squalor and other social evils; it means freedom from arbitrary power in any form. A starving man is not free."41

As it turns out, however, the battle over liberalism was not yet over, especially not in Europe. The Austrian-born economist Friedrich Hayek, a disciple of Mises, vehemently contested Beveridge's and Roosevelt's use of the word. Hayek joined the London School of Economics in 1931, where he became a virulent critic of FDR-style liberalism and the New Deal. Horrified by political developments on the European continent,

Hayek warned that embarking on "collectivist experiments" would put countries on a slippery slope to fascism. It was necessary, therefore, to return to "the old liberalism,"42 by which Hayek of course meant government nonintervention. He grew more insistent and radical about this over time.

In 1944, Hayek published the best-selling Road to Serfdom. "It is necessary," Hayek wrote in his impassioned introduction, "to state the unpalatable truth that it is Germany whose fate we are in some danger of repeating." Liberal socialism was a contradiction in terms. It was not the role of government to be kind or generous. Rather, the government's role was to protect the freedom of the individual. Western civilization was "an individualist civilisation," and true liberal principles derived from the ideas of English individualism. Liberal socialism, on the other hand, was a German import, stemming from the ideas of Bismarck's advisors, and was a danger to Western civilization. It would invariably lead to "serfdom" and "totalitarianism," a relatively new word at the time.

Despite such efforts, only two years later Hoover acknowledged defeat. With discernible bitterness, he conceded: "We do not use the word 'liberal.' The word has been polluted and raped of all its real meanings. . . . Liberalism was founded to further more liberty for men, not less freedom."43

Similarly, in a 1948 speech titled "What Is a Liberal?", Republican senator Robert Taft complained that a word "which used to be a sound Anglo-Saxon word with a clear meaning, has lost all significance." Contrary to the administration's use, the word "liberal" in the political sense certainly does not connote 'generous.'" The basic meaning of the word remained pure and simple: "someone in favor of freedom."44

It seems that Hayek eventually gave up on the word too. In 1950, he moved to the University of Chicago, where he accepted a position as professor in the Committee on Social Thought.
There he inspired, among others, the American economist Milton Friedman and eventually became a favorite of those we now call “libertarians.” Many of his followers to this day claim that they are the true, that is “classical” or “orthodox,” liberals. Meanwhile Hayek called himself at various points a “consistent liberal,” a “neoliberal,” or a “radical” because liberalism no longer meant what it once had.

Remarkably, these battles over the meaning of the word “liberal”—as pitched as they were—did not involve liberalism’s origins. Both streams of liberalism claimed that their version lay in English history. To Hayek liberalism owed its origins to English individualism, while to Dewey it owed them to English humanitarianism. Neither man mentioned France or Germany.

This was only the beginning of the ejection of France and Germany from the history of liberalism. Over time, any French contribution receded to the background and Germany was seen as a source of illiberalism. By 1947, both versions, Dewey’s as well as Hayek’s, had, for better or worse, become “the American creed.” Liberalism was, as Lionel Trilling remarked in 1950, not only America’s dominant tradition, but even its sole intellectual tradition.

Epilogue

Constant often sounds as if he were speaking of Hitler’s Germany.

—JOHN FLANNERY, 1963

Today, the polemics over liberalism continue. A word that began as an insult is still used that way by its right-wing critics. We have only to recall Ronald Reagan’s famous reference to the “dreaded L-word” to recognize the word’s polemical force. American Democrats avoid using it to describe themselves for fear that it will render them unelectable. Right-wing pundits call it a disease and a poison; it’s a danger, they say, to moral values.

We’ve heard this all before. Since its genesis, liberalism has been subject to a barrage of similar attacks. The fact that liberals today disagree among themselves is also nothing new. Liberalism has never been a fixed or unified creed. Since the very beginning, it has encompassed lively debates. What is new is the way liberals today describe themselves and what they stand for. They overwhelmingly stress a commitment to individual rights and choices; they rarely mention duties, patriotism,
self-sacrifice, or generosity to others. These terms are conspicuous by their absence in the contemporary liberal lexicon. Liberals have conceded the high ground to their adversaries.

The scholarship on liberalism reinforces and confirms this liberal self-definition. Countless works repeat the same message: liberalism is a doctrine whose core principle is the protection of the individual, his and her rights, interests, and choices. Any book, article, or essay, whether it is scholarly or polemical, and whether it approves or disapproves of liberalism, claims that its core principle is that governments exist to protect these rights, interests and choices. One renowned scholar of liberalism even asserts that it is founded on the “animal needs” of human beings.¹ From such self-descriptions it is only a short way to conclude, as one critic has, that liberals “explicitly rejected any notion of a common good. They wished to privatize and diminish, although not eliminate, the contents of human life.”²

While they argued over many things, the great majority of liberals discussed in this book certainly did not defend animal needs or reject the common good. That is what their enemies said about them, not what they said about themselves. Over the course of the centuries, liberals consistently described their values as patriotic, selfless, and meant to promote the public good. When liberals fought for individual rights, it was because they thought that such rights enabled individuals to better perform their duties. Liberals constantly looked for ways to promote civic values. Morality was central to their goals.

All the liberals we have encountered in this book also believed that the purpose of governments was to serve the public good. At first this meant dismantling aristocratic impediments that kept wealth, power, and opportunity in the hands of a hereditary elite. Later it entailed intervening to fight plutocracy and the exploitation that accompanied it. At every point their underlying object was to promote the material and moral well-being of all.

From Benjamin Constant and his concern about fostering self-sacrifice to Alexis de Tocqueville, who worried about selfishness, and Leonard Hobhouse and Herbert Croly, who agonized about plutocracy, liberals were virtually obsessed with morality and the building of character. Early liberals, as we have seen, even shunned the word “individualism” because of its negative connotations. Constant, and many others after him, endorsed “individuality” instead; still others spoke of “personhood.” “Personhood” and “character” were words that suggested the ability and need of individuals to cultivate their moral and intellectual potential, to understand their interconnectedness with others, and to understand their civic duty.

Liberals were far from perfect. Although they saw themselves as disinterested agents of reform, this was, at best, wishful thinking. Often it was a result of blindness. They were capable of excluding entire groups of people from their liberal vision: women, blacks, the colonized, and those they referred to as the “unfit.” When they did this, however, there were always other liberals who accused them of betraying their liberal principles. They were urged to be true to the core meaning of being “liberal,” which meant being not only freedom-loving and civic-minded, but also generous and compassionate. Being liberal was an aspirational ideal—something to live up to.

Why has this history been lost? Where did our focus on rights and interests come from? How and why were duties, self-sacrifice, and the common good downplayed or even written out of our histories of liberalism?

In this epilogue I venture some answers to these questions. I propose that an “Anglo-American liberal tradition” based so centrally on individual rights was a construction of the middle of the twentieth century, if not even later. Borrowing from the
work of others, I argue that the “turn to rights” happened as the consequence of the two world wars and the Cold War. Two interrelated processes were involved. First, as we have seen, liberalism was Americanized. Second, it was reconfigured into a doctrine that prioritized individual rights. As the US historian Alan Brinkley has shown, liberals lowered their sights and adjusted their goals.  

Liberalism and the Totalitarian Threat

Originally published in 1944, Friedrich Hayek’s Road to Serfdom both profited from and helped amplify a growing fear of totalitarianism. Liberalism’s association with a strong state and government intervention began to be seen as a liability. It was important to be aware, Hayek wrote in his surprise best seller, that “it is Germany whose fate we are in some danger of repeating.”  
The “social liberalism” toward which Britain and America were heading would invariably lead to totalitarianism.

In America, supporters of New Deal liberalism were labeled socialist or even communist, words which took on increasingly ominous meanings. Robert Taft, Republican senator from Ohio, in 1948 accused New Deal liberalism of having “acquired Russian overtones.” Liberals who accepted John Dewey’s or FDR’s conceptions of liberalism were not really liberal; they were “totalitarian.”

In this anxious and pessimistic climate, people became receptive to the ideas of several religious thinkers, both Catholic and Protestant, who blamed liberalism itself for the ethical crisis in which the West found itself. Among the most important of the Catholic theorists were Waldemar Gurian, a Russian-born German-American political scientist, and Jacques Maritain, a French philosopher. The most prominent Protestant theorist was Reinhold Niebuhr. Gurian, Maritain, and Niebuhr all spread the idea that liberal societies themselves had a tendency to become illiberal. “Antiliberalism,” wrote Gurian, was nothing but the “completion of liberalism.” The “totalitarian state” was not the rejection of liberalism, but “its last and most radical consequence.”

Catholic and Protestant arguments overlapped in significant ways. When you banish God from the world, these Christian theorists said, every foundation of morality is undermined. The loss of faith in God leads to a moral relativism that makes people vulnerable to demagogues and dictators. Totalitarianism, which these theorists were among the first to analyze, was the result of liberal disenchantment with the world.

Niebuhr was one of the most influential American intellectuals of his generation. In articles carrying titles like “The Pathos of Liberalism” or “The Blindness of Liberalism,” he weighed in on the dangers lurking within. Totalitarianism was the logical outcome of human arrogance, a danger that threatened any place where the reality of original sin was denied and Christian principles rejected.  
Niebuhr cautioned Americans about their liberal culture’s failure to understand the depth of evil to which they may sink when they tried “to play the role of God in history.” Given what had occurred in Germany, he recommended that American liberals temper their plans for social reform and view all collectivist answers to social problems with trepidation. Almost every experiment in social engineering, he warned, contained “some peril of compounding economic and political power.” Hence “a wise community will walk warily and test the effect of each new adventure before further adventures.”

Knowingly or unknowingly, these Christian theorists repeated an old accusation: liberal secularism was to blame. By attacking religion, liberals had brought this calamity on themselves. We have heard this argument over and over again.
But we have also heard that throughout history, Christian liberals disputed such allegations. They insisted that liberalism had nothing to do with rejecting God or attacking religion. A liberal form of Christianity, that is, one more focused on morals rather than sinfulness, would help improve the world and is what God intended.

Niebuhr was very critical of liberal Christianity. He thought it projected a dangerously naïve and utopian idea of human goodness and educability. In an article titled “Let the Liberal Churches Stop Fooling Themselves!,” he chastised their optimism and idealism, which he claimed had helped cause the European crisis. Men were not naturally good, but sinful, irrational, violent, and selfish. Without recognizing that fact, no moral society was possible.

By 1945, the position of Pope Pius XII on the question was more than clear. In his Christmas Message that year, he repeated, in an updated form, the long-established and standard Catholic condemnation of liberalism. Simply stated, liberals had banished God from the world and had thus given rise to totalitarianism. Liberalism’s destructive force, Pius declared, had brought only brutality, barbarity, and ruin.

Catholic propagandists spread this message. Jonathan Hallowell’s book, *The Decline of Liberalism* of 1946, warned that the spiritual crisis out of which totalitarianism emerged was a crisis peculiar not only to Germany, but to all of Western civilization. Liberalism, with its rejection of transcendent truth, was to blame. In *The Rise and Decline of Liberalism* of 1953, Thomas Neill underlined the point. Since it destroyed all spiritual values, “the logic of liberalism” was to lead straight to totalitarianism. Some years later, in 1964, yet another anti-communist Catholic crusader, James Burnham, called liberalism the “ideology of Western suicide,” since it was infected with communism.

Influential émigrés to the United States from Nazi Germany concurred with this damning appraisal of liberalism. Hannah Arendt, the German Jewish political philosopher and friend of Gurian who would later pen the now-famous *Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951), wrote that liberalism was the “spawn of hell” that gave rise to Nazism. For the German Catholic émigré Eric Voegelin, communism was only the radical expression of liberalism. By supplanting the “truth of the soul” and promoting the disenchanted of the word, liberalism was in large part responsible for the self-destructive politics of the West. Leo Strauss, another German Jewish émigré, accused what he took to be liberal relativism of opening the door to nihilism and totalitarianism. Liberals and totalitarians, he thought, had much in common.

**The Turn to Rights**

Such prominent and powerful attacks on liberalism in the intellectual climate of the Cold War bred a defensiveness in American liberals, many of whom felt the need to clarify and accentuate what made their liberalism not totalitarianism. It was in so doing that they toned down their plans for social reconstruction and emphasized, rather, their commitment to defending the rights of individuals. Liberalism was reconfigured as the ideological “other” of totalitarianism, whether of the left or right. In the process, liberalism lost much of its moral core and its centuries-long dedication to the public good. Individualism replaced it as liberals lowered their sights and moderated their goals. Liberalism was once again reconfigured, and in the process its goals were downgraded.

The American historian and public intellectual Arthur Schlesinger was a key figure in this development. His widely read and much admired book *The Vital Center* (1949) illustrates
well the change in the intellectual climate and shift in liberal sensibilities. A man deeply influenced by Niebuhr, Schlesinger regretted that so many liberals had been so slow to recognize the danger of totalitarianism and the threat it posed to the individual. It was imperative for them to reaffirm and reassert their fundamental commitment to each individual's rights. Liberalism, he said, could not afford to compromise with totalitarianism.

Another key figure in the Cold War transformation of liberalism was the Russian-British Jewish social and political philosopher Isaiah Berlin. In a seminal essay titled “Two Concepts of Liberty,” which he originally delivered at Oxford University in 1958, Berlin addressed what he saw as the clash of ideologies that dominated the world. It was, he claimed, a conflict between two kinds of liberty, one that was totalitarian and the other liberal. The liberal kind of liberty was essentially negative. It was centrally concerned with shielding personal freedom, that is, with protecting the individual from government coercion. The totalitarian kind of liberty was associated with utopian projects promising “collective self-direction” and “self-realization.”

One after another, self-identified American liberals now showed their antitotalitarianism by emphasizing their support of individual rights. Genealogies based on a canon of great thinkers were constructed and anthologies published. Founding fathers of liberalism were discovered and many of the liberal theorists, politicians, and writers discussed in this book were passed over or their influence played down.

“Great thinkers” were read in ways that buttressed the liberal turn to rights and aspects of their thought that complicated such a reading were minimized. John Locke became a founding father of liberalism and his defense of property stressed. Occasionally, non-Anglophone thinkers were made to fit the canon. John Plamenatz’s *Readings from Liberal Writers,* *English and French* (1965) contained excerpts from Benjamin Constant. He noted with approval that “Constant often sounds as if he were speaking of Hitler’s Germany.” Constant’s defense of individual rights was emphasized above all his other concerns. His efforts at state building and constant worries about morals, religion, and “perfectibility” were downplayed or completely ignored.

Over time, then, liberalism’s staunchest defenders rallied around the notion that liberalism was primarily about individual rights and interests. The history of liberalism recounted in this book was lost. In a sense, the twentieth-century liberals willingly adopted the argument traditionally used to malign them, in other words, that liberalism was, at its core, an individualist, if not selfish, philosophy.

In 1971, John Rawls’s book *A Theory of Justice* appeared. Praised for revitalizing and enriching current debates about liberalism, it showed how a liberalism based on individualism and self-interest would, in fact, logically entail the welfare state. For the sake of argument, Rawls posited a group of self-interested but also rational individuals and showed that such persons—endeavoring to maximize their advantages in conditions of uncertainty—would choose not a laissez-faire society but the welfare state. In so arguing, he was, in a sense, turning a conservative and rights-based argument around against itself. In the process, however, he suggested that there was little need for any deliberate promotion of the common good for a liberal society to work. There was no need to worry about overcoming man’s selfish impulses. It had become okay to be selfish.

What came to be known as the communitarian critique now accused liberalism of being too individualistic and too concerned with private rights at the expense of the common good. Liberalism, it was said, operated with a defective notion of the self, one that ignored the social constitution of individuals
and the importance of communal bonds. It was blamed for undermining notions of citizenship and community, and for contributing to America’s moral decline. Forgotten was the fact that liberals had championed community and morals for centuries.

Many liberals themselves began to lament the stress on rights and bemoan the chastened liberalism or “liberalism of fear” that was so impoverished that it seemed like a philosophy of mere damage control. But they mostly accepted the idea that liberalism was about rights.

Given liberalism’s concern with individual rights, feminists wondered how it could work for women. By being so individualistic, they said, liberalism was negligent toward the needs of women as women. It ignored the fact that all human beings have a core of moral “personhood.” Here again, the debate about liberalism was sorely lacking in historical perspective. As we have seen, liberals were almost obsessively concerned with women “as women” and they rarely spoke of women’s individual “rights.”

The liberal turn to rights also helped fuel a long debate about whether the founding values of America were liberal or republican, as if these two were contradictory. The question became another way of asking whether the United States was founded to protect rights (“liberalism”) or to cultivate virtue (“republicanism”). Scholars interested in the purported differences between liberalism and republicanism were soon describing liberalism as “[a] modern, self-interested, competitive, individualistic ideology emphasizing private rights.”

The (Supposed) Illiberalism of France and Germany

The use of this individualistic and rights-based Anglo-American liberalism as a yardstick made it possible for many to conclude that France and Germany had defective, or even nonexistent, liberal traditions. The many ways in which both countries in fact contributed to the history of liberalism receded to the background or disappeared altogether.

The experience of Nazism cast a long shadow on German history and caused historians to focus on what they concluded was the failure of German liberalism. In 1953, the German historian Friedrich Sell published The Tragedy of German Liberalism, which set the course for future studies. The problem with German liberalism, he said, was that the country had been inhospitable to the “Anglo-Saxon tradition.” German liberalism was defective because it had never properly understood that the government’s role was to protect individual rights.

A great number of books followed Sell’s, most of which spoke of the weakness, deficiency, or failure of liberalism in Germany. People asked whether Germany even had a liberal tradition. According to Columbia professor Fritz Stern’s influential treatment, Germany had an “illiberal, namely an authoritarian rather than a liberal tradition.”

Those who believed that a liberal tradition did exist in Germany, declared it faulty because it was a “state liberalism”; it was a liberalism “that regarded the state as the essential instrument to realize the liberal program.” The market model remained marginal in Germany, and its general pro-state orientation was said to be “the greatest weakness of early German liberalism.”

This focus on its supposed deficiencies sometimes turned into a search for the reasons why Germany was not England. Some said it had to do with Germany’s flawed view of freedom, others that it lacked a bourgeoisie. It became interesting to discuss when and where German liberalism “deviated” from the “normative” process of development. Apparently, German liberals lacked political ambitions.
Something similar happened in France, although a bit later. What has since been called an “antitotalitarian moment” occurred in the 1970s. Reacting against the post–World War II politics of many French intellectuals who had developed an attraction to communism, scholars began to look for the causes of this embarrassing truth. A number of them, among whom François Furet was an influential pioneer, attributed it to the supposed proto-totalitarianism of the French Revolution, and the related “fact” that France lacked a healthy liberal tradition.

French liberalism, it was concluded, was not a true liberalism because it lacked a strong emphasis on individual rights. Fundamentally an alien import, “genuine” liberalism had had trouble taking root in France.\textsuperscript{24} And like the German variety, French liberalism was flawed because of its statism. Somewhat contradictorily, French liberalism was also said to “refuse the political,” because of its purported confidence in free markets.\textsuperscript{25} No wonder, then, that historians found it so very confused.\textsuperscript{26} We hear of “the apparent inability of [French] liberals to recognize the central elements of their own doctrine.” The problem is that they “did not have the philosophic resource to think through liberalism,” because they didn’t have a Locke.\textsuperscript{27}

The French did, however, have a Benjamin Constant, who was now rediscovered and reread as one of the rare liberals in the true, individualist, Anglo-American sense. Constant’s deep concern with building a viable state and combating individualism was ignored; and his lifelong interest in religion and interest in “self-sacrifice” was left out. Instead, prominent scholars determined that Constant’s “master concept” was “individual independence,”\textsuperscript{28} and that he espoused a “radical individualism.”\textsuperscript{29} Some noted that France also had a number of political economists who understood the liberal value of self-interest, the minimal state, and deregulated markets.

In France, as in America, this supposedly true and individualistic liberalism came under criticism. Compared to republicanism, with its emphasis on citizenship and virtue, critics described French liberalism as all too hedonistic.\textsuperscript{30} The Catholic philosopher Pierre Manent accused liberalism’s founders of rejecting any notion of a common good and, in a succinct summary of his view of liberalism, posited Machiavelli and Hobbes as its founders. Sounding much like the long line of Catholic critics of liberalism whom we have considered in this book, Manent reasoned that liberalism originated in an attack on the Christian Church. This, in Manent’s estimation, is why liberalism has an ominous tendency to self-destruction and can lead ineluctably to totalitarianism.\textsuperscript{31} Manent’s is the now two-hundred-year-old Catholic critique repackaged.

Although liberalism today is widely regarded as the dominant political doctrine of the West, a kind of triumphalism co-exists with pessimism. We often hear that liberalism is suffering from a crisis of confidence, a crisis made more intense by the recent rise of “illiberal democracy” around the world.\textsuperscript{32} It is suggested that the problem could be solved if only liberals would agree about what they stood for and have courage in their convictions. Liberalism, there are those who say, contains within itself the resources it needs to articulate a conception of the good and a liberal theory of virtue.\textsuperscript{33} Liberals should reconnect with the resources of their liberal tradition to recover, understand, and embrace its core values. This book is meant to relaunch that process. If it manages to reset and stimulate the debate on the history of liberalism, it will have served its purpose.