

AMERICAN CONSTITUTIONALISM  
VOLUME II: RIGHTS AND LIBERTIES  
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Supplementary Material

Chapter 7: The Republican Era – Foundations/Principles

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Woodrow Wilson, **The Meaning of Democracy** (1912)<sup>1</sup>

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*The 1912 presidential race was split four ways. The Republicans were divided between the incumbent, William Howard Taft, and the insurgent ex-president Theodore Roosevelt. New Jersey governor and transplanted Virginian Woodrow Wilson was the Democratic Party nominee. Wilson's nomination helped shed the party's image of Populist radicalism, but the contours of his own moderate progressivism were not well defined. With a sizable following but still a distinct fourth was the Socialist Eugene Debs. The central question of the campaign was how to deal with the powerful corporations that had rapidly arisen in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and now seemed to dominate the economy.*

*Advised by labor lawyer Louis Brandeis, whom he later appointed to the Supreme Court, Wilson sought to distinguish himself from both Taft and Roosevelt. Wilson proposed to address the problem of monopoly by active government intervention to recreate the conditions of economic competition, whereas Roosevelt accepted monopolies as inevitable and proposed subjecting them to government supervision and administration. Where Wilson offered "industrial liberty," he charged that Roosevelt offered "industrial absolutism." The "history of liberty," Wilson declared, "is a history of limitation of governmental power, not the increase of it." Roosevelt promptly responded that, "the limitation of governmental power, of governmental action, means the enslavement of the people by the great corporations who can only be held in check by the extension of governmental power."<sup>2</sup> He accused Wilson of being a proponent of "laissez faire." Wilson could hardly let such a charge go unanswered. In this campaign address delivered in Scranton, Pennsylvania, on September 23, 1912, Wilson explained his philosophy of activist government.*

... You know that it was Jefferson who said that the best government is that which does as little governing as possible, which exercises its power as little as possible. That was said in a day when . . . all that was necessary was that the government should withhold its hand and see to it that every man got an opportunity to act if he would. But that time is past. America is not now, and cannot in the future be, a place for unrestricted individual enterprise. It is true that we have come upon an age of great cooperative industry.

... [T]reatment of labor by the great corporations is not now what it was in Jefferson's time. Who in this great audience knows his employer? I mean among those who go down into the mines or go into the mills and factories. You never know, you practically never deal with, the president of the corporation. . . . The only thing you know is that by the score, by the hundred, by the thousand, you are employed with your fellow workmen by some agent of an invisible employer. Therefore, whenever bodies of men employ bodies of men, it ceases to be a private relationship. . . . The dealing of great bodies of men with other bodies of men is a matter of public scrutiny, and should be a matter of public regulation.

Similarly, it was no business of the law in the time of Jefferson to come into my house and see how I kept my house. But when my house, when my property, when my so-called private property,

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<sup>1</sup> Excerpt taken from Scranton Speech, September 23, 1912, *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson* Project Records, Swem Collection, Box 457, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Library.

<sup>2</sup> John Wells Davidson, ed., *A Crossroads of Freedom* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1956), 130; Howard Gillman, *The Constitution Besieged* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993), 151.

became a great mine, and men went along dark corridors amidst every kind of danger to dig out the bowels of the earth things necessary for the industries of the whole nation, and when it was known that no individual owned these mines, that they were owned by great stock corporations . . . then all the old analogies absolutely collapsed and it became the right of the government to go down into those mines and see whether human beings were properly treated or not. . . .

. . . [W]e are accused of wishing to minimize the powers of the government of the United States. I am not afraid of the utmost exercise of the powers of the government of Pennsylvania, or of the Union, provided they are exercised with patriotism and intelligence and really in the interest of the people who are living under them. But when it is proposed to set up guardians over those people to take care of them by a process of tutelage and supervision in which they play no active part, I utter my absolute objection. . . .

. . . There is no man, there is no group of men, there is no class of men, big enough or wise enough to take care of a free people. If the free people can't take care of itself, then it isn't free. It hasn't grown up. That is the very definition of freedom. If you are afraid to trust any and every man to put forth his powers as he pleases, then you are afraid of liberty itself. I am willing to risk liberty to the utmost, and I am not willing to risk anything else.



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