The Promise of American Life Study Guide

The Promise of American Life by Herbert Croly

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BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

The Promise of American Life, published in 1909, is the most comprehensive statement of the Progressive political movement that occurred at the start of the twentieth century. It came at a time when the United States was in great flux due to the Industrial Revolution. At this time, the wealth of the country was becoming increasingly concentrated in the hands of fewer and fewer individuals, most often corporate and political bosses. In the text, Croly lays out a plan to regain a political and economic balance through strong federal regulations and social programs. He argues that only programs administered by the federal government can truly help pave the way for America to fulfill the promise of a positive and fair democracy for the greatest number of citizens. Croly's theories were influenced by his parents, who were both political journalists, and by the philosophers with whom he studied at Harvard. *Promise* was read by President Theodore Roosevelt, who was a proponent of its theories. The term "New Nationalism," which Roosevelt used as the label for his political reforms, was taken directly from Croly's book. Although *Promise* did not reach a wide readership, it was read by some very wealthy and influential people, including Willard and Dorothy Straight. They were so impressed by Croly's political theories, they contacted him and provided the backing to launch a new periodical of progressive thinking which became *The New Republic,* a periodical still in circulation today. It is said that some of Croly's proposals were an influence on Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal programs.

Author Biography

Herbert Croly was born on January 23, 1869, in New York City, the third of five children. His interest in journalism and politics was definitely influenced by his parents. They were both journalists and highly interested in political and economic issues. Croly's mother, Jane Cunningham Croly, was a longstanding journalist for the *Sunday Times and Noah's Weekly Messenger, the New York World,* and eventually became editor of *Demorest's Monthly.* David Goodman Croly was a reporter for the *Herald,* and later worked for the *New York World.*

Croly received his early schooling at J. H. Morse's English, Classical, and Mathematical School for Boys in New York. In 1884, Croly began to take classes at the City College of New York. In September 1886 he enrolled at Harvard. However, Croly left Harvard in June 1888 due to his father's failing health. Croly moved home to serve as his father's secretary until his father died in April 1889. Upon his father's death, Croly inherited a share in the *Real Estate Record and Builders' Guide,* a publication co-founded by his father in 1868. Croly served as editor of the guide for the next two years. In 1891, Croly joined the staff of the newly created periodical *Architectural Record.*

In May of 1892, Croly married Louise Emory, a young woman from an upper middle-class Baltimore family whom he met while at Harvard. As they decided that it was time for Croly to finish his studies, he returned to Harvard later that year, concentrating on philosophy and economics, as before. During this time, Croly honed his political philosophy and paved the way for the writing of *The Promise of American Life*, which was published in 1909. Even by the time of the book's publication, Croly had not yet earned his bachelor's degree. The degree was finally granted in 1910 in recognition for his work on the book.

In 1912, Croly published his second book. *Marcus Alonzo Hanna: His Life and Work* is an extensive biography of a noted politician much admired by Croly. He also published another book of political theory in late 1914: *Progressive Democracy,* which furthers Croly's musings on Progressivism. In this work, he updates the theories put forth in *The Promise of American Life* to make them more viable and actionable. In 1914, the *New Republic* was launched with Croly at the helm. The periodical became very popular and influential and is still in existence today. Croly remained active as a journalist and political theorist until his death on May 17, 1930, in New York City.

Plot Summary

Chapter 1: What Is the Promise of American Life?

In the first chapter of *The Promise of American Life* Croly argues that America has no tradition of strong nationalism as is often present in older countries. He notes that the nation will have to become an active participant in the fulfillment of its democratic promise, and that it is dangerous to assume that the promise of a better future will fulfill itself. He lists the many achievements of America thus far, but cautions that an unequal distribution of economic and political power threatens to derail the nation.

Chapter 2: The Federalists and the Republicans?

Here Croly begins a review of American political ideas and practices. He provides an account of the political theories of Alexander Hamilton and Thomas Jefferson. Croly compares and contrasts Hamilton's call for strong federal regulation with Jefferson's push for extreme individualism. While Croly discloses that his preferences are "on the side of Hamilton," he posits that the ideal for political reform is actually an amalgam of the two positions.

Chapter 3: The Democrats and the Whigs?

In this chapter, Croly continues to lay out American political history, discussing Henry Clay and the Whig Party. Croly claims that the Whigs "renewed a Hamiltonian spirit and interest in national cohesion." He laments, however, that they were ineffective in putting their political theories into practice. Croly also discusses Andrew Jackson's political career. He sees Jackson's policies as dangerous because they were based on conciliation and compromise. He notes that while Jackson's pioneer spirit was very appealing to the general public, his policies harmed the nation because they promoted selfish individualism.

Chapter 4: Slavery and American Nationality

This chapter gives an in-depth look at how the problem of slavery divided the nation. Croly lists five major factions that came about as a result of the controversy: The Abolitionists, the Southern Democrats, the Northern Democrats, the Constitutional Unionists and the Republicans. After briefly outlining the platform of each of the above parties, Croly launches into a discussion of Abraham Lincoln. Croly holds Lincoln up as the quintessential statesman. He provides a brief summary of Lincoln's political background and praises him for his selfdiscipline and his ability to subordinate his own interests to those of the nation. He praises Lincoln for confronting the nation's contradictory practice of allowing slavery to flourish while claiming to be a democracy.

Chapter 5: The Contemporary Situation

Croly begins this chapter by discussing the period of activity and prosperity that occurred after the restoration of peace following the Civil War. He notes that with peace came the the Industrial Revolution, which created many problems as well as increased opportunities. Croly claims that a lack of powerful federal control has allowed special interests to flourish and that these interests are gradually weakening the national promise. There is also a discussion of how lawyers, political bosses, and industrialists have exploited the system for their own gains and that the inefficiency of central government has contributed largely to this state of affairs.

Chapter 6: Reform and the Reformers

Here Croly discusses the careers of four reformers who have thus far been unable to effect much positive change: William Jennings Bryan, Williams Travers Jerome, William Randolph Hearst, and Theodore Roosevelt. Of the four, Croly puts most of his hopes in Theodore Roosevelt, whom he says has "revived the Hamiltonian idea." He praises Roosevelt for giving men with special abilities an opportunity to serve the public. Croly says that reformers must combine intellect and morality in order to be effective, and that most have failed because they are not "team players." Their desire to be "stars" weakens their political efficacy.

Chapter 7: Reconstruction; Its Conditions and Purposes

Croly provides an analysis of the meaning of democracy. He notes that democracy is often thought of as a system that dispenses with restrictions. He claims that this is a problem, however, because the "ultimate responsibility for the government of a community must reside somewhere." If equal rights are afforded to all individuals, some will naturally take advantage of this and class strife will occur. The answer lies in "constructive discrimination." Individuals must be encouraged to earn distinction, but no individual should be given a permanent privilege. Selected individuals must be "obliged constantly to justify their selection."

Chapter 8: Nationality and Democracy; National Origins

In this chapter Croly presents a summary of the way in which modern European national states originated. He focuses on England, France, and Germany. He presents them as examples of different kinds of democratic experiments, and shows how the national idea of each country has influenced its formation. Croly proposes that in all cases citizens must be willing to subordinate their own special interests for the good of the country. He also warns that nations must not seek to destroy others for, "[A] nation

seeking to destroy other nations is analogous to a man who seeks to destroy the society in which he was born."

Chapter 9: The American Democracy and Its National Principle

Here Croly proposes that, in order for a nation to remain strong, a national principle must emerge. He urges that American democracy must become loyally nationalistic. Croly sees a danger in leaving too much power in the hands of state and local governments because they are inefficient and prone to supporting special interests. He calls for an increase in centralized power and responsibility.

Chapter 10: A National Foreign Policy

In this chapter Croly discusses America's increasing emergence as an international player. Croly notes that America can no longer remain isolationist. He urges that America adopt a strong, clear national policy in relation to the other nations of the world. He cautions against the aggressive tendency put forth by the Monroe Doctrine, but also warns against too rigid a policy of isolationism. He notes that the United States must work to secure a peaceful and stable American continent, being particularly wary of Canada and Latin America. Moreover, he calls for better relations with Canada so that the threat of European intervention can be minimized. In addition, Croly discusses the possibility of American intervention in foreign wars.

Chapter 11: Problems of Reconstruction

Croly states that public opinion must be converted to a better understanding of its national responsibilities. Here, once again, Croly discusses the inefficiency of state governments and calls for a reorganization. He says that the people should have the power to initiate legislation, and moreover, that no important laws should be passed without their direct consent. He notes that institutions have failed the people and that legislatures have become increasingly corrupt, working primarily on behalf of special interests. To remedy this situation, Croly states, stronger federal controls must be put into place. Finally, he notes that the rights of recall and referendum must be available to the people in order to remove corrupt government officials and policies.

Chapter 12: Problems of Reconstruction-(continued)

In this chapter, Croly explains how allowing each state government to control its own commerce makes it very difficult for the railroads and corporations. He calls, instead, for controls by the federal government. However, he does not support the Sherman Anti-Trust Law because he believes it is ineffective. He does not believe that corporations should be prevented from making large profits. Rather, Croly calls for systems that

would disperse huge corporate profits for the widest public benefit. Ultimately, the answer is taxation.

Chapter 13: Conclusion-The Individual and the National Purpose

Here, Croly sums up his arguments. He notes that education is the key to all of his foregoing proposals. Croly believes that education will provide the means for the American people to better themselves and their communities. He feels that individual improvement and achievement will strengthen nationalism and lead to a better society, as well as to a better democracy.

Characters

Otto von Bismarck

In his section on European history, Croly discusses the contribution of German chancellor Otto von Bismarck. He sees him as a fine example of a leader, a man who was able to balance his own beliefs with what was best for his country. Von Bismarck became the first chancellor of the German Empire in 1871 when William I of Prussia was proclaimed German Emperor. This gave von Bismark almost complete control of foreign and domestic affairs. He opposed the socialists in Germany and, in order to weaken their influence, instituted a program of sweeping social reforms. He passed laws providing for sickness, accident, and old age insurance; instituted controls on child labor; and established maximum working hours. Croly praises his strong leadership and in his discussion of German nationality notes:

Thus the modern German nation has been at bottom the work of admirable leadership on the part of officially responsible leaders; and among those leaders the man who planned most effectively and accomplished the greatest results was Otto von Bismarck.

William Jennings Bryan

Croly devotes an entire section of *The Promise of American Life* to Secretary of State William Jennings Bryan and his reforms. He is unimpressed, however, with Bryan's proposals and calls his programs "ill conceived." Croly finds Bryan's political thinking incoherent and faults him for proposing an increase of federal power on the one hand while exuding a distrust of national organization on the other. Bryan served as a member of the House of Representatives from Nebraska from 1891 to 1895. He ran unsuccessfully for the presidency three times, but was finally named secretary of state by President Woodrow Wilson. Some of the reforms instituted by Bryan were the income tax, the popular election of senators, womens suffrage, and prohibition. Bryan also supported public ownership of the railway system and the unlimited coinage of silver. Croly faults Bryan for his desire to take the middle ground. As he notes, "He stands for the sacrifice of the individual to the popular average; and the perpetuation of such a sacrifice would mean ultimate democratic degeneration.

Henry Clay

Henry Clay is, for Croly, an example of a man with good intentions but without the ability to put them into action. Clay was a statesman who stood for a combination of democracy and nationalism, an idea that Croly supports. He notes, however, that Clay and the Whig Party were ineffective because they were poorly organized. Henry Clay was elected to the House of Representatives from 1810 to 1814 and again from 1815 to 1821. He was a candidate for the presidency in 1824, losing to John Quincy Adams, who then appointed him secretary of state. Clay was elected to the Senate in 1831,

where he led a strong opposition against President Andrew Jackson. Clay and his supporters saw Jackson as tyrannical and they formed the Whig party to combat policies they perceived as overbearing. They were unsuccessful in swaying popular opinion, however. Clay again ran for the presidency in 1844, but was defeated by James K. Polk. This was a crushing blow for both Clay and the Whig Party. However, Clay was not deterred by this defeat and he reentered the Senate in 1849. Croly faults Clay and the Whigs for not sticking to their convictions more strongly. As he notes in his section on The Whig Failure:

they believed that the consolidation and the development of the national organization was contributory rather than antagonistic to the purpose of the American political system, yet they made no conquests on behalf of their convictions.

Stephen Douglas

Stephen Douglas was a member of the House of Representatives from 1843 to 1847 and then a U.S. senator until his death in 1861. During his senatorial campaign in 1858, Douglas participated in the now famous Lincoln-Douglas debates. In his discussion of the problem of slavery, Croly notes that Douglas was a proponent of the "popular sovereignty" doctrine, which held that the nation could allow the expansion of slavery while still preserving the tenets of democracy.

Alexander Hamilton

Renowned statesman and secretary of the treasury under George Washington, Alexander Hamilton laid out a political philosophy largely embraced by Croly in *The Promise of American Life.* Although Croly admits that Hamilton's call for a strong, involved central government was not as popular as Thomas Jefferson's concept of laissez-faire government, he believes that Hamilton was correct in calling for strong federal controls. Croly notes that one of Hamilton's major failings was that he did not have enough faith in the American people. He credits Hamilton, however, with the foresight to understand that "Unionism must be converted into a positive policy which labor[s] to strengthen the national interest and organization, discredit possible or actual disunionist ideas and forces, and increase the national spirit."

William Randolph Hearst

William Randolph Hearst became the head of a vast publishing empire and also served as a congressman from 1903 to 1907. Croly vilifies him as one of the worst kind of reformers. He labels Hearst a "fanatic" and a "demagogue" who vehemently pushed for equal rights and called for the vilification of anyone who had been responsible for the inequalities that had occurred. He accuses Hearst of playing to popular opinion and notes that his radical views and incendiary language were harmful to the national purpose. Croly strongly denounces Hearst and calls his ideas "a living menace to the orderly process of reform and to American national integrity."

Andrew Jackson

Andrew Jackson, the seventh president of the United States, hated special economic or political privileges and believed that "one man was good as another." Croly sees this as a very misguided idea and claims that it actually led to the suppression of special abilities among the American people. Croly also notes, however, that Jackson's strong, domineering character won him popular support because he was seen to embody the pioneer spirit. Croly claims that Jackson's biggest failure was his inability to see the discrepancy between sincere patriotism and selfish individualism. This led to the splitting off of various self-interests and factions, weakening the nation and contributing to the economic and political imbalance that Croly finds deplorable.

Thomas Jefferson

Croly discusses at length the policies of Thomas Jefferson, who was elected the third president of the United States in 1801. He believes that Jefferson was misguided in his belief that the federal government should be primarily concerned with foreign affairs, leaving states and local governments to deal with local matters. Croly criticizes this laissez-faire concept, claiming that the lack of central governmental controls have been responsible for allowing the nation to drift into an economic and political imbalance. He faults Jefferson for his emphasis on individualism and calls for the abandonment of the "Jeffersonian principle of noninterference."

William Travers Jerome

William Travers Jerome was a lawyer and a district attorney in New York from 1901-1909. Known for his plain speaking, Jerome was a reformer who called for the end of "administrative lying." While Croly notes that Jerome had a strong moral character, he condemns the fact that a call for honesty and integrity was Jerome's entire platform. Croly claims that Jerome was unable to affect change because he did not have a persuasive public persona and that he never really gave serious concern to the issues. As Croly notes:

Mr. Jerome's weakness consisted in the fact that he had never really tried to lead public opinion in relation to state and national political problems, and that he was obliged to claim support on the score of personal moral superiority to his opponent.

Abraham Lincoln

The Promise of American Life. Croly devotes an entire section to Lincoln's policies and great statesmanship. He notes that Lincoln was able to recognize the contradiction between trying to build a strong democracy with equal rights for all while allowing slavery to flourish. Croly sees Lincoln as the perfect American politician and a

quintessential reformer. He notes that Lincoln achieved this by subordinating his own importance and putting the needs of the nation first. Throughout his book, Croly praises Lincoln as the ultimate man of vision, compassion, and perfect statesmanship: "The life of no other American has revealed with anything like the same completeness the peculiar moral promise of genuine democracy."

John Davison Rockefeller

John D. Rockefeller was an American industrialist who organized the Standard Oil Company of Ohio in 1870. He became a millionaire through aggressive and cutthroat business practices. Croly holds up Rockefeller as a prime example of the corrupt "business specialists" that have flourished due to the laissez-faire practices of the federal government. He notes that men such as Rockefeller will use all available means to serve their own special interests unless regulations are put in place to prevent them from doing so.

Theodore Roosevelt

Theodore Roosevelt was president at the time Croly published *The Promise of American Life.*In the book, Croly praises Roosevelt as a reformer with a lot of potential. He applauds Roosevelt for instituting the nationalization of the reform movement and for standing for a "national idea." Croly labeled Roosevelt's reform ideas with the term "New Nationalism," a phrase that was later adopted by the president himself. Croly claims that Roosevelt has emancipated American democracy from its "Jeffersonian bondage" by giving men of "special ability, training and eminence a better opportunity to serve the public." Croly also highly admires Roosevelt's faith in human nature.

Daniel Webster

American statesman and congressman Daniel Webster is labeled a misguided reformer by Croly. He discusses Webster along with Henry Clay and the Whig Party, noting that a major mistake made by the Whigs was that they failed to recognize the problem of allowing slavery to flourish in a democracy. Croly also notes that Webster and his party had some positive national ideas, but they were unable to institute reform because they did not possess a strong enough national feeling.

Themes

Leaders and Leadership

In *The Promise of American Life,* Croly discusses many styles of leadership and comments upon the efficacy of various styles. He exalts Abraham Lincoln as a great leader because he had the intelligence and foresight to see issues objectively, and was able to subvert his personal interests to those of the nation. Croly also laments the fact that while some statesmen have had sound and useful political theories, their lack of leadership skills has prevented their message from being well received by the public. He also discusses how a strong public persona can overshadow the message, and claims that this can result in the acceptance of bad policies. Croly believes that this was the case for Thomas Jefferson. He notes that Jefferson was so well liked by the public that they were blinded to some of the harmful policies and political practices he supported. Croly also discusses Alexander Hamilton at length, and is particularly disappointed in Hamilton's leadership style. He feels that Hamilton's unpopular personality led to many of his ideas being discounted. He claims that Hamilton was unwilling to alter his delivery or ideas to court public opinion. As Croly notes, "He was not afraid to incur unpopularity for pursuing what he believed to be a wise public policy, and the general disapprobation under which he suffered during the last years of his life, while it was chiefly due to his distrust of the American democracy, was also partly due to his high conception of the duties of leadership."

Industrial Revolution

At the beginning of the twentieth century there was a huge increase in industry in the United States. Citizens moved in large numbers from rural areas into the cities to take advantage of the increase in job opportunities. America's agrarian-based society rapidly changed to one of industrial production. Croly sees this rapid explosion of industry as one of the primary causes of society's problems because it served to create an imbalance of economic and political power. He writes, "The net result of the industrial expansion of the United States since the Civil War has been the establishment in the heart of the American economic and social system of certain glaring inequalities of condition and power."

Slavery

Croly names slavery as one of the primary issues affecting the history of American political thought. He claims that it was the seminal, make-orbreak issue around which many political parties rallied. Croly feels that political theorists who were unwilling to acknowledge the contradiction of allowing slavery to flourish in a democracy were destined to fail. In fact, he believes that Abraham Lincoln's clear-sightedness on this issue was the main contributing factor in making him such a great statesman.

Economics

Croly sees the unequal distribution of wealth as one of the main problems facing the nation in the early 1900s. He notes that a great deal of wealth was amassed by corrupt individuals who exploited the inefficiency of government for their own gains:>

The rich men and the big corporations have become too wealthy and powerful for their official standing in American life. They have not obeyed the laws. They have attempted to control the official makers, administrators, and expounders of the law.

Croly believes that this economic imbalance has increasingly led to discontent and class strife. Croly sums up the problem in the following way:

The prevailing abuses and sins, which have made reform necessary, are all of them associated with the prodigious concentration of wealth, and of the power exercised by wealth in the hands of a few men.

Nationalism

Croly sees nationalism as the key to fulfilling the promise of American life. He says that the truly great citizen must be willing to subvert his own special interests to those that are best for the nation. In order for this to be achieved, he states, people must have complete confidence in their federal government: "Only by faith in an efficient national organization and by an exclusive aggressive devotion to the national welfare, can the American democratic ideal be made good." The point Croly fails to explain, however, is how this confidence is to be inspired. He places great faith in human nature and seems to believe that, if government does the "right thing," an appropriate nationalistic spirit will follow.

Individualism

Croly believes that American society must strike a balance between individualism and nationalism in order to fulfill its potential. Moreover, he believes that, in order to achieve nationalism, the talent and intellect of special individuals must not be repressed. Thus, he argues for individualism to be encouraged: "An individual can, then, best serve the cause of American individuality by effectually accomplishing his own individual emancipation- that is, by doing his own special work with ability, energy, disinterestedness, and excellence." In other words, Croly feels that democracy can only be strengthened by encouraging the best and the brightest individuals. He does note, however, that no individual or class interest should be awarded permanent special economic or political privileges, as this has the potential to throw the system out of balance.

Class Conflict

In his discussion of the class struggles of his time, Croly claims that a laissez-faire government promotes class conflict in a society through its nonintervention. He notes that equal rights must be promoted through governmental controls; if these controls are not put in place, bickering and strife will ensue. He believes that if equality is not legislated, people will become suspicious of the privileges and opportunities of others:

The principle of equal rights encourages mutual suspicion and disloyalty. It tends to attribute individual and social ills for which general moral, economic and social causes are usually in large measure responsible, to individual wrong-doing; and in this way it arouses and intensifies that personal and class hatred, which never in any society lies far below the surface.

Democracy

Croly points out that democracy is often equated with the concept of popular government, but that this translates into a weak central government. He calls for a rethinking of this concept so that democracy benefits all of the people through the careful control of a strong central government. He favors a "Hamiltonian" concept of democracy rather than a "Jeffersonian" one. That is, one which is run by careful and efficient federal control. However, Croly actually believes that the ideal state of democracy comes from an amalgamation of the two. He ulti mately encourages the use of "Hamiltonian means" to achieve "Jeffersonian ends."

Style

Narrative

In *The Promise of American Life,* Croly presents his political ideas in the form of a narrative. He relates the political history of the United States and of several European nations as a story. He also tells the stories of a large number of statesman who have been influential throughout the course of American politics. In putting forth his ideas in the form of a story, one might think it would make Croly's book more accessible to the average reader. Unfortunately, this is not the case.

Complex Sentence Structure

Croly's dense sentence structure serves to muddy the story line, making it a difficult text to work through. Even political analysts find the stories and arguments presented in Croly's work complicated. In his article for Society, Sidney A. Pearson notes, "[I]t is a difficult work to read." This may have been one of the contributing factors that kept it from a larger readership when it was originally published. In fact, during Croly's lifetime, only about 7,500 copies of the book were sold. In his writing, Croly rarely uses simple, declarative sentences. Instead, his prose is filled with interjections, clauses, and sub-clauses, a fact that several critics have commented upon. In his article on Croly's book for The Public Interest, Wilfred M. McClay notes, "[I]ts 454 pages contain more than their fair share of ponderous, murky passages."

Vocabulary and Terminology

Within the narrative itself, Croly does an excellent job of defining the vocabulary and political concepts used in *The Promise of American Life.*

For example, the student who may not be familiar with terms such as "Hamiltonian" and "Jeffersonian" is provided with a thorough discussion of each before Croly goes on to use these concepts as a basis for his argument. Croly also includes discussions of terms such as "Jacksonian," "Democracy," "Whigs," and "Federalism." In addition to the explanation of terms used, Croly includes informative portraits of the major political figures who play a central role in his theories. By including this extensive background information and a thorough discussion of the political terms used, Croly makes the vocabulary in his text accessible to students who may have only a rudimentary knowledge of political history and terminology.

Historical Context

The Industrial Revolution

The early twentieth century was a time of great change for America. The Industrial Revolution was in full swing and great numbers of people were moving from rural areas into cities to take advantages of the job opportunities created by new technologies and industry. Many inventions had come about during the previous half-century and many were still being developed. This time period saw the introduction of the sewing machine (1846), the telephone (1877), the phonograph (1877), the cash register (1879), and the adding machine (1885), to name a few. These inventions would work their way into the life of American industry, causing an explosion of production and manufacturing. Unfortunately, it also caused a dramatic and rapid population growth in many American cities, which resulted in poor living conditions, including terrible overcrowding and pollution. A vast increase in the immigrant population also added to the problem. Although conditions were often harsh, many people still saw America as a land of opportunity and wanted to take advantage of the work that was available. Factory owners also took advantage of the situation, making employees labor in terrible conditions for long hours with little pay and no benefits. It is important to remember that at this time there was no minimum wage law, no child labor laws, and no regulation of the length of a working day. Sometimes children as young as six years old labored six days a week for fourteen hours a day in deplorable conditions. Because of this mistreatment of workers, unions sprang up and many reformers called for legislation to protect workers' rights.

Civil Rights

The Civil War ended in 1865. While African Americans were granted citizenship, prejudice and bigotry against them still existed. In 1896 the U. S. Supreme Court upheld segregation in Plessy vs. Ferguson, maintaining that separate-but-equal treatment of African Americans was still allowable under the law. There was much hostility between the races and the lynching of blacks was not an uncommon occurrence. Black activists began to call for better conditions, and in 1909 the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) was created. Women were also fighting for their rights at this time. In most states, they had not yet earned the right to vote. Consequently, many women's organizations sprang up to address this problem. Women suffragists organized and created a strong movement advocating voting rights for women. They sometimes delivered their message through civil disobedience and demonstrations and were often arrested as a result. However, their work finally paid off. The Nineteenth Amendment to the Constitution, which gave women the right to vote, was finally passed in 1919.

Politics and Reform

In 1908 William Howard Taft defeated William Jennings Bryan for the presidency of the United States. During his campaign, Taft promised to revise the tariff law, and upon election he immediately set out to do this. He called for a special session of Congress and eventually signed a tariff bill that turned out to be an abysmal failure. While Taft himself was extremely pleased with the bill, many in his party were not. He alienated a large faction of Republicans and seriously damaged his efficacy as president. The progressives in the party were particularly angered and began vehemently opposing Taft's policies. This secured his overwhelming defeat in the following presidential elec tion of 1912. Overall in America, things were moving and changing so fast during this time period that it was difficult for politicians or the general citizenry to get a handle on them. The influx of immigration, the explosion of production, and quick changes in the demographics of American society spawned numerous problems. These conditions, however, also created a generation of reformers who tried to propel the United States into a more enlightened and reasonable attitude. They longed for a strong and fair democracy that would afford great opportunities for all of its citizens.

Critical Overview

The Promise of American Life

is widely acknowledged to be the major treatise on American progressive thought. Although influential, Croly's book was not widely read when it was first published. The readership it did gain, however, was a group of educated, influential, and politically savvy people, including president Theodore Roosevelt. As Edward A. Stettner reports in his book *Shaping Modern Liberalism*, Roosevelt was so impressed with Croly's theories that he wrote to him, stating, "I do not know when I have read a book which I felt profited me as much as your book on American life. . . . I shall use your ideas freely in speeches I intend to make." Roosevelt actually borrowed the term "new nationalism" from Croly, a label which he applied to his own progressive reforms. Several other of Croly's contemporaries were particularly impressed with his book as well. Stettner also reports that one of Croly's peers, political analyst Walter Lippman, called Croly "the first important political philosopher who appeared in America in the twentieth century."

The Promise of American Life has held up well over time. It is still considered a brilliant piece of political writing by many modern critics. In 1989, John B. Judis in the *New Republic* wrote, "What Herbert Croly called for-the renewal of national spirit through democratically controlled governmental action-continues to deserve the thoughtful consideration of all Americans." And in a 1998 article for *Society* Sidney A. Pearson Jr. writes, "Croly helped to give the Progressive Movement some of its most articulate expression in the opening decades of the twentieth century-perhaps better than any other single writer." Not all recent critics are positive about Croly's views, however. In fact, some find his ideas harmful. In the December 1997 issue of *Reason*, Virginia I. Postrel writes, "Herbert Croly is not exactly a household name, but he should be. Seven decades after his death, we are still living in the political world his ideas built-and struggling to escape it." Some modern critics even find Croly's theories misguided and naive. In a 1999 article for *The Public Interest,* Wilfred M. McClay sums up his thoughts on Croly's political ideas: "A more self-delusional strategy would be difficult to imagine." Whether critics agree with Croly's thoughts or not, it is clear that his political thinking has had a profound impact on American history and that it still resonates and generates much interesting discussion today.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3
- Critical Essay #4

Critical Essay #1

Beth Kattelman

Kattelman is a freelance writer and holds a Ph.D. in theatre from Ohio State University. In this essay, Kattelman considers how Croly's strong faith in human nature provides one of the main weaknesses in his political argument.

In his book *The Promise of American Life,* Herbert Croly puts forth a political theory based on a great faith in human nature. While this optimistic outlook is refreshing, it can also be considered somewhat naive, and makes for one of the main weaknesses in his argument. At the time of the book's writing, Croly was very concerned about the imbalance of wealth and power that had come about in American society. He saw this as a major threat to democracy and believed that, unless this imbalance was corrected, American society would suffer and would eventually lose its democratic foundation. As he notes, "A democracy has as much interest in regulating for its own benefit the distribution of economic power as it has the distribution of political power, and the consequences of ignoring this interest would be as fatal in one case as in the other." The imbalance of power and wealth was in large part due to the explosion of production brought about by the Industrial Revolution. Americans were rapidly moving into the cities, and opportunists were finding ways to exploit the system for their own gains. In order to bring the distribution of wealth back into balance, Croly proposed strengthening national controls. But how was this to be accomplished? According to Croly the key lay in strong leadership and an educated public whom, he believed, would ultimately better the democracy and provide opportunities for the largest number of citizens. While, on first consideration, this sounds like a feasible solution, it is soon apparent that Croly is strong on theory but weak on specifics. He is unable to provide details about exactly what type of education would be required or where these great leaders were to be found. Croly supports his theory with many narrative examples of what has gone wrong in the past, and a few things that have gone right, but does not set out a specific, actionable plan. He instead lays the basis of his argument on a strong faith in human nature and seems to believe that given enough facts, education, and open dialogue, the American people and their leaders will choose to do the right thing.

While the concept of faith in the American public lends a reassuring tone to Croly's book, it is also the basis for one of the main weaknesses of his argument. Unfortunately, much of the history and examples that make up the bulk of his book run counter to the foregoing argument rather than helping to support it. Throughout much of the historical narrative he presents examples of occasions in which society and politicians have not chosen to do the right thing. In fact, Croly even admits, "[a]lmost every member of the American political body has been at one time or another or in one way or another perverted to the service of special interests." So, Croly seems to understand that money and power corrupt, and yet he also seems to believe that if you control the flow of the money and power through a strong national organization, this corruption will disappear. Underlying the theory is a sense that the major problem is only that the wrong leaders have been in power. As Sidney A. Pearson, Jr., notes in his article "Herbert Croly and

Liberal Democracy," "He seems to have taken for granted the proposition that Progressive politicians and intellectuals were evidently motivated by a higher sense of national purpose and the common good than were conservative politicians and intellectuals." For instance, Croly discusses Abraham Lincoln as the prime example of a perfect type of leader. But even the stories Croly presents about Lincoln-a man whom he considers a brilliant statesman-run counter to his theories. Croly shows how Lincoln was a person with a vision. That is what made him a good leader. Lincoln's story does not support the theory that he became a good leader because he had strong national controls placed on his options, however. On the contrary, through his narrative, Croly shows that Lincoln was a great man because he had a vision. He saw what he believed was right and worked toward it.

This is one of the main problems with Croly's work. On one hand, he describes how individual freedom and equality can lead to a dangerous imbalance of political and economic power, "[t]he automatic fulfillment of the American national Promise is to be abandoned, if at all, precisely because the traditional American confidence in individual freedom has resulted in a morally and socially undesirable distribution of wealth," yet, somehow, Croly expects the American people to make the correct choices for society when working collectively if only given enough information. This is the supposed built-in safety valve that will keep things in proper balance. As Pearson explains, "Demagoguery would be ruled out by the openness of the debate and popular judgment on the effectiveness of the policies." There is a disconnection here. Croly fails to address the fact that a society is made up of a collection of disparate individuals and that corruption can flourish in the collection as easily as it can in the individual. Croly repeatedly speaks of "unity of purpose," yet he is unclear about how this unity is to be achieved. Croly notes that "Only by faith in an efficient national organization and by an exclusive and aggressive devotion to the national welfare, can the American democratic ideal be made good." But how is that devotion to be inspired? The text does not clearly answer this question. Croly has a bit of a "chicken and the egg" conundrum at work here: If the American people are happy, they will see that democracy is a wonderful ideal and will work to better it, and if the people work to better democracy, they will be happy. But how is the cycle to begin? Croly's answer-"The real vehicle of improvement is education."

One of the key ideas in Croly's theory is that of using education to create the "disinterested" individual who subverts his own special interests to work for the good of society. It is important to note here that the term "disinterested" is not a synonym for "uninterested." While the latter term has a somewhat negative connotation meaning a "lack of concern, or caring," the former is actually a positive, proactive term meaning that one "puts aside special interests." Croly saw this as an important key point. If America was to fulfill its promise, it would need to be led by a group of statesman and citizens who were willing to contribute their own best work for the good of all the people. In his article, "Croly's Progressive America," Wilfred M. McClay discusses the significance of the term and what it meant to the Progressive movement: "For Progressives, however, the word carried strong ethical implications, pointing toward an extraordinarily high standard of unselfish, reasonable, ascetic, scientific, and impersonal judgment-a disposition that always placed the public interest above all other

considerations." Even here, though, McClay recognizes that this selflessness is an "extraordinary" state of affairs. Given this, it is reasonable to conclude that, unfortunately, in most cases the ordinary citizen or even the ordinary leader would not achieve such high, lofty aspirations. If America had been peopled by only the "extraordinary," perhaps this idea would have had some plausibility. That is an absurd notion, however. Most people are ordinary human beings, driven by their own wants and desires. That is the normal state of human affairs, and to pretend differently is nearsighted and naive. Also, if America had been peopled by "the extraordinary," the problems Croly is addressing would have never arisen in the first place. Croly's theories would have been more feasible if he had taken true human nature more into account. Several critics, in fact, have noted that Croly's faith in man's morality lead him to unrealistic expectations. In "Croly's Progressive America," Wilfred M. McClay writes of how Croly believed "the citizenry could, with the right tutelage, be remade into disinterested servants of a high national ideal and a glorious national purpose," but follows up with the comment, "A more self-delusional strategy would be difficult to imagine." In her article for Reason, Virginia I. Postrel is even stronger in pointing out the failings of Croly's ideas. She notes, "A Crolyist government has a natural but nasty tendency to abuse its citizens." Here, the idea is reemphasized that power corrupts, a problem that Croly fails to fully address.

It is refreshing, however, to read the hopeful, optimistic theories of someone like Croly, and perhaps it is not totally fair to call his theories delusional or foolish. He lived in an earlier and what some might say was a more naive time. It was a time in which the collective human nature of Americans had not yet been fully tested. America is now in a more jaded era. Today, many do not have the strong faith in the collective good that Croly exhibited. Having come through numerous assassinations, Watergate, terrorism, and several wars, it may not be surprising that we have a more skeptical view of human nature. As McClay notes in his article, "None but a fool would trust today, as the Progressives did, in the disinterestedness of experts, the perspicacity of social reformers or the truthfulness of presidents." Perhaps this statement is overly pessimistic, but it does point out how cynical we have become and how faith in leadership has been eroded. In fact, even Croly himself undercuts his own argument toward the end of the book with the admission, "human nature is composed of most rebellious material, and that the extent to which it can be modified by social and political institutions of any kind is, at best, extremely small." As small as the chance was, however, Croly still held on to the hope that a transformation for the common good could be accomplished. Perhaps this is his ultimate triumph and why *The Promise of American Life* is such an important piece of political thought. Its optimism is inspiring and the fundamental belief in the goodness of human nature and, by extension, in democracy, is something not often found in political commentaries.

There is no doubt that *The Promise of American Life* is a difficult book to read, but it's also a rewarding one. The work contains a lot of food for thought and provides a glowing example of a belief in the American system. On reading Croly's work, Thomas Geoghegan wrote in his book *The Secret Lives of Citizens*, "It's a jungle in there, but every so often I'd come into a clearing. For example, his wonderful sense of democracy. It's that form of government that results in continuous social improvement." Croly

believed strongly in the democratic principle and, even though not all of his theories may be practical or plausible, he still provides some wonderful kernels of wisdom. If given careful consideration, we may find some insights that could be of use to our society today.

Source: Beth Kattelman, Critical Essay on *The Promise of American Life, in Nonfiction Classics for Students,* The Gale Group, 2002.

Ozersky is a critic, essayist and American cultural historian. In this essay, Ozersky discusses why Herbert Croly's barely remembered book was so influential-and what that influence reveals about both Croly's time and our own.

Herbert Croly's *The Promise of American Life* may be the most influential book nobody has heard of. Well, that may be an overstatement. Obviously, historians take the book seriously, as do scholars of political science, government, and public policy. But Croly's *magnum opus* is hard to read, repetitive, and obscure. It does not seem, at first reading, to be a passionate manifesto for the reinvention of America so much as a meandering essay about the history of our democracy. Croly never uses one sentence when four sentences will do, or, for that matter, a page when a whole chapter will do.

So why is *The Promise of American Life* so influential when it is so hard to read? It helps to put the book back into the context of its time. Croly's book was seen as the most perfect statement of a new school of thought coming into place in America in the early years of the twentieth century. Throughout the country, educated members of the governing classes were coming to embrace the idea that welltrained professionals and legislators had it within their power, at long last, to improve America through concerted rational effort. It wouldn't be easy, and it couldn't be left to amateurs, but the work could, and would, get done. Progressivism, as it came to be called, was clearly the dominant movement in America. That is, insofar as Progressivism can be seen as a movement. It's probably more accurate to see it as the rise of professionalism and expertise in reaction to the chaos and helter-skelter growth of America in the decades after the Civil War. The so-called "Gilded Age," was a period of labor unrest, nativism, fortune-building, sprawling railroads, and mass unrest. Men like Andrew Carnegie and J. P. Morgan rose to new heights of wealth and power; other Americans by the thousands fell to new depths of poverty, dependency, and subordination. Even on the level of practical daily life, the new economic and demographic life of the country was overwhelming old institutions-the church, the laws, the tariff.

In response, it became obvious that some directing intelligence was necessary; and it so happened that highly-educated, confident individuals in every field were gravitating towards reform. Of this class, Theodore Roosevelt, the brash young president who took office in 1901, was the most visible representative; but until Croly came along, no one had worked out any first principals in a cohesive way. No one had given voice to progressivism's highest aspirations. The movement had a hero, in Theodore Roosevelt; but no one before Croly was able to explain progressivism to itself. No less a figure than Supreme Court justice Felix Frankfurter called *The Promise of American Life* "a

reservoir for all political writing . . . Roosevelt's New Nationalism was countered by Wilson's New Freedom, but both derived from Croly."

But as Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., has remarked, Croly does not represent a summary of progressivism. He wasn't overly interested in the progressive movement in the western states, where some of the most important reforms the movement achieved took place under men like Wisconsin's Robert LaFollette. Nor was he by any means at one with such eastern progressive leaders as Louis Brandeis and Woodrow Wilson, the latter a far more influential Progressive than even Theodore Roosevelt. But Croly's role is still central to the progressive undertaking. And insofar as progressivism laid the groundwork for modern government, Croly can be said to be an architect of America government to this day. Croly was able to unite the grandiose feelings of American exceptionalism so prevalent in the nineteenth century-the sense that America was different, with unbounded vistas, unfettered by the evils of the old world-with a highly rational justification for an activist federal government.

In *The Promise of American Life*, Croly reconceives American democracy. In the laissezfaire atmosphere of the Gilded Age, Americans still hung on to notions of rugged individualism and a minimal role for the government. The idea of applying education and rational direction to growth were seen by many as un-American, certainly as elitist and undemocratic. Croly identified this strain of thought as descending from Thomas Jefferson. His own ideal, which he identified with Jefferson's rival Alexander Hamilton, was of a government empowered by the People to reach its true destiny, of greatness and infinite promise. Thus, the "New Nationalism" that Croly propounded was often summed up as "Jeffersonian means by Hamiltonian ends." He wrote. "[We] must become . . . a democracy devoted to the welfare of the whole people by means of a conscious labor of individual and social improvement; and that is precisely the sort of democracy which demands for its realization the aid of the Hamiltonian nationalistic organization and principle."

For Croly, America is at a crossroads. Although much of *The Promise of American Life* is organized as history, as Croly takes the reader through the development of American political thought, his eyes are focused at all times firmly on the future. In Jefferson's time, an "empire for liberty" could be extrapolated indefinitely, thanks to cheap land and the independent citizenship bestowed by it. But once the nation ran out of cheap land (the 1890 Census declared the end of a continuous western border), and wage labor become nearly universal, the future became more provisional, a thing in peril. Croly, like so many other Americans, felt that it was our future that defined us, so much so that it was in constant danger of being taken for granted. In this, Croly is both quintessentially American and quintessentially progressive. No country is less burdened by its past, or more enamored of its future, historically speaking, than America. Progressives, for all their education and class bias, were no different in this regard than were the small-town orators who made patriotic speeches on village greens every Independence Day. From the beginning," Croly writes, "the Land of Democracy has been figured as the Land of Promise. Thus the American's loyalty to the national tradition rather affirms than denies the imaginative projection of a better future."

This limitless future, for Croly and for all progressives before and after him, was the guiding light of all their efforts. However they immersed themselves in the technicalities of reform, or the perils of politics, nearly all believed in a splendid future. Croly's highly nuanced and complex treatise on democracy essentially amounts, in the end, to a theoretical blueprint for that future. That is why, unlike so many other learned and densely written essays by men of the nineteenth-century, Croly's continues to live today. The people who were in a position to inform the future took his study as their manifesto, or at least as an inspiration, and the future they created is the American state of today. Wilfred McClay, writing in 1999 in *The Public Interest,* makes the foll owing claims for Croly's book:

its fundamental ideas still flow unacknowledged through our national political discourse, permeating the agendas and rhetoric of both political parties. . . . No book has been more effective in presenting a vision of what a fully consolidated and nationalized American polity and society might look like, and persuasive in arguing why such a transformation was necessary if the essence of America's promise was to be fulfilled.

The transformation had begun to happen in Croly's lifetime, under the unprecedented activist administration of Woodrow Wilson, whose "New Nationalism" slogan was borrowed from Croly. But it did not truly transform American politics until the elevation of Franklin Roosevelt in 1932. Roosevelt's New Deal, and Lyndon Johnson's Great Society, are the most famous examples of the efforts of an American government to make the future happen; but to some extent all government is involved in this project now.

Critics debate whether this is a good thing. And even the most committed liberal technocrat, steeped in Crolyism and the gospel of activist government, will admit that it requires great faith in the perfectability of American society. But in 1909, before the Great War destroyed it, that belief was in the grasp of everyone, from "Perfectionist" preachers to good government advocates. It was even available to a shy, bespectacled, bookish man, writing hours of high-minded theory, without any clue that he was helping to form the future.

Source: Josh Ozersky, Critical Essay on *The Promise of American Life,* in *Nonfiction Classics for Students,* The Gale Group, 2002.

Critical Essay #2

In the following essay excerpt, McClay examines Croly's success in "presenting a vision of what a fully consolidated and nationalized American polity and society might look like."

No knowledgeable scholar of American political thought would dispute the importance and influence of Herbert Croly's 1909 book *The Promise of American Life.* In the book's own day, Felix Frankfurter extolled it as "the most powerful single contribution to progressive thinking," while Walter Lippmann crowned Croly the "first important [American] political philosopher" of the century. It was the right book at the right time. Not only did it ride the wave of reformist energy that swept American life at the turn of the century, embodied in such towering figures as Theodore Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson, and Robert La Follette, but it also provided the era's scattered reform impulses with a coherent philosophical basis. The book's success offers potent evidence of the enduring power of ideas in history.

Although it sold a piddling 7,500 copies in its heyday, it managed to reach the right readership: the tiny but formidable elite of forward-looking, confi- dent, university-trained students of political institutions and social forces who comprised the brains and motive force behind the Progressive movement. Among the book's most admiring readers was former President Roosevelt himself, who in 1910, two years before his ill-fated campaign to regain the presidency, wrote to Croly,

I do not know when I have read a book which I felt profited me as much as your book on American life . . . I shall use your ideas freely in speeches I intend to make. I know you won't object to my doing so, because, my dear sir, I can see that your purpose is to do your share in any way for the betterment of our national life . . . I want very much to have a chance to talk to you.

Whether Croly's book was a cause or an effect of Roosevelt's New Nationalism, with its vision of a strong central government regulating a highly consolidated economy for the public good, there was an uncanny degree of convergence in the two men's thinking, indicating the extent to which Promise captured the *Zeitgeist* in its pages.

Historical significance is one thing and a present- day following is another; and though the book has its admirers, it is hard to find many people today who would testify under oath that they have actually read *The Promise of American Life.* In one sense, this is not surprising. It is an old book, and not easy to get hold of. Its 454 pages contain more than their fair share of ponderous, murky passages. Its leisurely exposition wanders, Mister Magoo fashion, over all the known universe, bumping into or stumbling over such diverse issues as labor unions, specialization, the Philippines question, the reorganization of state governments, municipal corruption, tax policy, and the Australian ballot. Because it was published nine decades ago, many of the issues raised by *Promise,* perhaps inevitably, are no longer of topical interest.

Still, this lumbering book, penned by an obscure and somewhat eccentric editor of an architectural trade magazine-who was later to become founding editor of *The New Republic*-remains worthy of our respectful examination. For one thing, it turns out to be a more interesting and complex book than either its proponents or detractors tell us. And its influence abides. Its fundamental ideas still flow unacknowledged through our national political discourse, permeating the agendas and rhetoric of both political parties. Nowhere else were progressive ideas expressed more powerfully. No book has been more effective in presenting a vision of what a fully consolidated and nationalized American polity and society might look like, and persuasive in arguing why such a transformation was necessary if the essence of America's promise was to be fulfilled. No book was more persuasive in showing how that analysis had to be followed all the way down the scale of social organization to the level of individual consciousness itself. And none contributed more to the fateful redefinition of liberalism in our century, from an ideology of the minimalist, decentralized state into an ideology of the activist, interventionist, and centralized national state.

Critical Essay #3

Croly's book was so successful because it went far beyond merely offering a new political philosophy or a collection of novel policy suggestions. It did both those things, but it also gave vitality and plausibility to that philosophy and those ideas by folding them into a narrative. It presented its assertions and prescriptions as elements in a striking retelling of the story of America. The United States was founded, Croly argued, upon three not entirely compatible tenets: a belief in the virtues of pioneer individualism, a strong commitment to limited government (especially a limited central government), and an unflagging confidence in a national ideal that he dubbed "the Promise of American life," by which he meant the steady advance of democratic values and gradual amelioration of social and economic disparities. Much of our subsequent history, in his view, can be explained as a jostling for supremacy among these three principles, a conflict that has repeatedly jeopardized the Promise of American life.

In the early years of American history, it was naïvely assumed that the Promise would fulfill itself, and that the three tenets need not come into conflict. In fact, it might have seemed that they were complementary, since encouraging settlement by pioneers, unhindered by the dictates of government, seemed indispensable for realizing the nation's material promise. But from the young nation's very beginning, and certainly as early on as the Federalist- Republican debates, there had always been disagreements over which of the tenets to emphasize. One camp subordinated all else to the pursuit of the Promise, believing that more vigorous leadership and a more disciplined way of life would be necessary to sustain the possibility of American "national fulfillment." The other camp, which followed the path of "national distraction," was more backward-looking, willing to preserve the virtues of individualism and limited government at all cost, even if doing so came at the expense of the Promise.

Such divisions were present even before the creation of the nation, but did not fully emerge until the Washington administration. The emblematic political figures embodying these conflicting principles were Alexander Hamilton and Thomas Jefferson. Croly did not disguise his preference for the former's political philosophy. He did, however, acknowledge that each faction possessed some portion of the truth, and that a felicitous combination of the two, mixed in the proper proportions-more Hamiltonian than Jeffersonian, of course-was necessary to achieve the optimal form of democratic government. This had been true from the founding, but it became particularly true under the conditions of modern social and industrial life, in which the rise of giant business corporations and massive disparities in wealth threatened to overwhelm the Promise entirely. Under such circumstances, America had no choice but to abandon its outmoded commitment to pioneer individualism and limited government. For Croly, this meant embracing an expanded and activist central government, a government that would use, as he put it, in what are perhaps the book's bestknown words, "Hamiltonian means" (a vigorous national government) to achieve "Jeffersonian ends" (the preservation of democratic values).

By putting it this way, Croly was arguing that the deepest meaning of American history had not changed. The means would change, but the end would not. America was still about the Promise, and the Promise had remained the same. But because the circumstances of modern American life had changed so dramatically, any effective pursuit of the Promise would have to be undertaken differently. Far from being a byproduct of the pursuit of individual well- being, or the gift of a providential destiny, the Promise now had to be conceived of as an ideal goal. All Americans now had to dedicate themselves to, and actively pursue, the transcendent national purpose of democracy and social progress. That was what the Promise had been all along, Croly argued. But we now realized it would not be fulfilled unless we worked at it very hard, submerging selfish interests for the sake of a larger collective goal .

Critical Essay #4

So we have two different meanings attached to the Promise of American life, and it makes all the difference in the world which we choose. Do we opt for Croly's sense of the Promise as a vast opportunity to transform the human condition and bring into being the New Jerusalem on the American strand? Or do we accept the Founders' more skeptical vision of human nature?

In pondering these questions, one might consider the way that Americans are instinctively drawn, during moments of domestic crisis and uncertainty, to political leaders known for their genuine reverence for the Constitution. Such leaders command our respectful attention, irrespective of party affiliation, precisely because they associate themselves so strongly with the spirit of the Constitution. Of course, it is equally true that Americans, like everyone else, have at times been drawn in the opposite direction, to the charismatic leader, the Theodore or Franklin Delano Roosevelt, who embodies the national government and personifies the national will, even if in the process he inevitably shows precious little regard for the niceties of constitutionalism. But surely if there is one thing the politics of this bloody century ought to have taught us, it is the danger of wishing to be ruled by myth-sized savior-leaders, and the pervasive dishonesty and fakery that inevitably flow from the false personification of high office. There was a mature sobriety in the eighteenth century's distrust of executive power, a sobriety that makes even more sense in an era dominated by spin-doctoring and media-magnified cults of personality.

Reverence for the Constitution remains our most reliable touchstone. None but a fool would trust today, as the Progressives did, in the disinterestedness of experts, the perspicacity of social reformers, or the truthfulness of presidents. Many more of us are inclined, in the final analysis, to trust in the disinterestedness of the Constitution, battered and bowdlerized though it be. That is why even the highly partisan legal scholars and historians who testified against President Clinton's impeachment felt compelled to do so in the name of the Constitution and of the original intentions of the Framers. It was an argumentative strategy that one can safely predict they would have roundly ridiculed in an academic setting but that they did not hesitate to employ in a public one. They were smart to do so. Their claims to expertise fell embarrassingly flat and impressed no one. But their instinct to move the discussion toward the Constitution, and to root their arguments in it, was more effective. It showed where the balance wheel of broad public authority is still to be found in this country.

The Constitution remains the shelter to which we all ultimately repair in our public life, precisely because it remains our principal anchor of legitimacy, one that neither the promise of expertise nor the promise of an earthly paradise can match. For a fanciful Promise wistfully sought is very different from a solemn Promise faithfully kept, just as a junk bond is different from a Treasury bill. Croly's understanding of the Promise, despite its many generous, intelligent, and visionary qualities, failed to take account of that. What Macaulay said wrongly of the U.S. Constitution could be said rightly of Crolyan progressivism: It was all sail and no anchor. And today, that drifting vessel can no longer

even claim the wind at its back. Those who still embrace it communicate their shared sentiments through occult signs and secret handshakes, publicly averring that "the era of big government is over" while crossing their fingers behind their backs. It's a good enough tactic for the short run but bad strategy for the duration.

Source: Wilfred M. McClay, "Croly's Progressive America," in *Public Interest,* No. 137, Fall 1999, pp. 56-72.

Topics for Further Study

Research John D. Rockefeller. What strategies did he use to found and promote his business? Do you believe he was a corrupt businessman or just a shrewd, hard-working person who was taking advantage of available opportunities?

The Industrial Revolution was a time of harsh child labor. Research the conditions under which some of these children lived and worked. Compare and contrast this with your own life. What would you have done if you were trapped in such difficult circumstances?

In 1900, entertainment was often provided by traveling vaudeville troops. Research vaudeville to discover what types of acts were presented. Put together your own vaudeville show. Afterward, discuss why you think vaudeville eventually disappeared.

At the time Croly was writing his book there was a huge influx of immigration to the United States. This immigration has continued as people still view America as a land of opportunity. Research immigration and census figures from 1900 and 2000. How have the demographics changed? What are your feelings on the matter? Do you believe the United States should maintain a policy of open, welcoming borders or do you feel stricter controls are needed?

Compare and Contrast

1900s: The Model T is introduced by Henry Ford at a time when very few people in America own a car.

Today: There are many makes and models of automobiles available. Almost everyone in America learns to drive.

1900s: The first daily comic strip "Mr. Mutt" (later "Mutt and Jeff") appears in the *San Francisco Chronicle.*

Today: Daily comic strips are a regular feature of many newspapers. They have become an integral part of popular culture, and many have been made into animated series for television.

1900s: The first coast-to-coast crossing of America by car is achieved. It takes sixty-five days.

Today: People can travel across America in a few hours in jet planes.

1900s: The first regular cinema is established in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

Today: Moviegoers can choose from dozens of movies at huge multiplex cinemas. Going to the cinema is now a traditional American pastime. People can also either rent or buy movies on videotape or DVD disc and view these movies in their own homes.

1900s: There are 46 states in the union, and the population of the United States is over 76 million people.

Today: There are 50 states in the union, and the population of the United States is approximately 286.5 million people.

1900s: Women do not gain the right to vote until 1919 and are primarily expected to stay home and take care of the family.

Today: Many women hold political office or pursue careers. Women try to balance work and family.

1900s: In 1906, Theodore Roosevelt takes the first trip outside the United States by a president in office. He visits the Canal Zone in Central America.

Today: The President of the United States makes numerous trips worldwide during the term of office to meet with other national leaders and to act as a goodwill ambassador for the United States. He also welcomes world leaders to the White House.

What Do I Read Next?

Croly's book was so successful because it went far beyond merely offering a new political philosophy or a collection of novel policy suggestions. It did both those things, but it also gave vitality and plausibility to that philosophy and those ideas by folding them into a narrative."

Progressive Democracy (1914, new edition published in 1997) is Croly's second major work of progressive thought. In it, Croly builds upon the concepts presented in *The Promise of American Life.*

Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* (1906) is a seminal text that reports the horrible conditions workers faced in meat-packing plants at the start of the twentieth century. It is a staple text for students and historians of the Industrial Revolution and of labor policy.

In *Herbert Croly of "The New Republic": The Life and Thought of an American Progressive* (1985), David W. Levy provides an in-depth look at Croly's life and work.

In The 1900s (published in 1999), Adam Woog provides an overview of the political, economic, and cultural life of the United States from 1900 to 1910.

Today, many do not have the strong faith in the collective good that Croly exhibited. Having come through numerous assassinations, Watergate, terrorism, and several wars it may not be surprising that we have a more skeptical view of human nature."Croly, like so many other Americans, felt that it was our future that defined us, so much so that it was in constant danger of being taken for granted. In this, Croly is both quintessentially American and quintessentially progressive."Croly's book was so successful because it went far beyond merely offering a new political philosophy or a collection of novel policy suggestions. It did both those things, but it also gave vitality and plausibility to that philosophy and those ideas by folding them into a narrative."

Further Study

Conklin, Groff, *The New Republic Anthology 1915-1935,* Dodge Publishing Co., 1936.

The New Republic Anthology is a collection of the best essays from the first two decades of the periodical founded by Herbert Croly. The book includes a wide array of political and social commentary, as well as providing a great snapshot of the time period.

Fink, Leon, *Major Problems in the Gilded Age and the Progressive Era,* D.C. Heath & Co., 1993.

This book combines primary source documents with commentary about the issues facing America from 1887 to 1920.

Forcey, Charles, *The Crossroads of Liberalism,* Oxford University Press, 1961.

Forcey profiles three political journalists of the progressive era: Herbert Croly, Walter Weyl, and Walter Lippman.

Olson, James S., *Encyclopedia of the Industrial Revolution in America,* Greenwood Press, 2001.

This reference book offers in-depth coverage of the economic, political, and social developments of the Industrial Revolution in the United States from 1750 to 1920.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Nonfiction Classics for Students (NCfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, NCfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on

□classic□ novels frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of NCfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of NCfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in NCfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by NCfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

NCfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Nonfiction Classics for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NCfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NCfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Nonfiction Classics for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Nonfiction Classics for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from NCfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Nonfiction Classics for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from NCfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Nonfiction Classics for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of NCfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Nonfiction Classics for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of NCfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Nonfiction Classics for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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