The Present Age
Robert Nisbet
The Present Age
Progress and Anarchy in Modern America
Robert Nisbet
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TO CAROLINE, ONCE MORE
Foreword

It is tempting in this year of the bicentennial of the Constitution to speculate on the probable reactions of the Framers to the product of their labors and aspirations as it stands today in the world two full centuries after its inception. Such speculation need not be altogether fanciful. Some constitutional lawyers speak of recovering the “original intent” of the Framers, a not impossible feat given the clarity of the document itself and the abundance of ancillary sources of the Framers’ views on government. If original intent can be reasonably retrieved after two hundred years, why not probable reaction to the present age in America?

What would the Framers be most struck by in America today? I mean after they had recovered from the shock of seeing clean, strong, white teeth instead of decayed yellow stumps in the mouths of their descendants; after they had assimilated the fact of the astounding number of Americans who were neither crippled, disease-wasted, nor pockmarked from smallpox; and, of course, after they had taken rapt eyes off the high-speed vehicles on the streets? After these astonishments, what reactions might there be to the political and cultural scene?

Three aspects of the present age in America would surely draw their immediate, concerned, and perhaps incredulous attention.

First, the prominence of war in American life since 1914, amounting to a virtual Seventy-Five Years War, and with this the staggering size of the American military establishment since World War II. The Framers had relied on two broad oceans for the license to draft the most nonmilitary constitution imaginable.

Second, the Leviathan-like presence of the national government in the affairs of states, towns, and cities, and in the lives, cradle to grave, of individuals. The Framers had worked most diligently to prevent any future hypertrophy of the federal government. They had particularly disliked the sprawling bureaucracies of Europe in their day.

Third, the number of Americans who seem only loosely attached to
groups and values such as kinship, community, and property, and whose lives are so plainly governed by the cash nexus.

In the pages following, I have enlarged upon these three aspects of the present scene in America.

Since this book contains in adapted form my 1988 Jefferson Lecture in Washington, D.C., I wish to express my deep appreciation to the National Council of Humanities for inviting me to deliver the lecture and my thanks to Dr. Lynne V. Cheney, Chairman of the National Endowment of the Humanities, for her kind interest and aid in the presentation of the lecture. I thank also Hugh Van Dusen, Senior Editor at Harper & Row, for his special help and encouragement.
The Prevalence of War

Of all faces of the present age in America, the military face would almost certainly prove the most astounding to any Framers of the Constitution, any Founders of the Republic who came back to inspect their creation on the occasion of the bicentennial. It is indeed an imposing face, the military. Well over three hundred billion dollars a year go into its maintenance; it is deployed in several dozen countries around the world. The returned Framers would not be surprised to learn that so vast a military has inexorable effects upon the economy, the structure of government, and even the culture of Americans; they had witnessed such effects in Europe from afar, and had not liked what they saw. What would doubtless astonish the Framers most, though, is that their precious republic has become an imperial power in the world, much like the Great Britain they had hated in the eighteenth century. Finally, the Framers would almost certainly swoon when they learned that America has been participant in the Seventy-Five Years War that has gone on, rarely punctuated, since 1914. And all of this, the Framers would sorrowfully find, done under the selfsame structure of government they had themselves built.

Clearly, the American Constitution was designed for a people more interested in governing itself than in helping to govern the rest of the world. The new nation had the priceless advantage of two great oceans dividing it from the turbulences of Europe and Asia. Permanent or even frequent war was the last thing any thoughtful American of the time would think of as a serious threat. Power to declare war could be safely left to the Congress, and leadership of the military to a civilian commander in chief, the president. Let the president have nominal stewardship of foreign policy but let the Senate have the power to advise and consent, and the entire Congress the power of purse over foreign policy and war.

It was ingenious, absolutely ideal for a nation clearly destined to peace
and to the cultivation of the arts and sciences. Agriculture, commerce, and manufacture were the proper and highly probable direction of the American future. The states, to which an abundance of powers and rights were left by the Constitution, would be the true motors of American prosperity.

We did a very good job, on the whole, of avoiding the traps and entanglements of the world for the first hundred and twenty-five years, and even made bold to warn the Old World that its presence in the Western Hemisphere, however brief, would be regarded with suspicion. Then things changed.

The present age in American history begins with the Great War. When the guns of August opened fire in 1914, no one in America could have reasonably foreseen that within three years that foreign war not only would have drawn America into it but also would have, by the sheer magnitude of the changes it brought about on the American scene, set the nation on another course from which it has not deviated significantly since. The Great War was the setting of America’s entry into modernity—economic, political, social, and cultural. By 1920 the country had passed, within a mere three years, from the premodern to the distinctly and ineradicably modern. Gone forever now the age of American innocence.

When the war broke out in Europe in 1914, America was still, remarkably, strikingly, pretty much the same country in moral, social, and cultural respects that it had been for a century. We were still, in 1914, a people rooted largely in the mentality of the village and small town, still suspicious of large cities and the styles of living that went with these cities. The states were immensely important, just as the Founding Fathers and the Framers had intended them to be. It was hard to find a truly national culture, a national consciousness, in 1914. The Civil War had, of course, removed forever philosophical, as well as actively political, doubts of the reality of the Union as a sovereign state. But in terms of habits of mind, customs, traditions, folk literature, indeed written literature, speech accent, dress, and so forth, America could still be looked at as a miscellany of cultures held together, but not otherwise much influenced, by the federal government in Washington. For the vast majority of Americans, from east to west, north to south, the principal, if not sole, link with the national government was the postal system—and perhaps also the federal income tax, which was approved at long last by constitutional amendment in 1913.
The Prevalence of War

The Great War changed all of this. By November 1918 after four years of war in Europe and nearly two years of it for America, the whole world was changed, Europe itself ceased in substantial degree to be a contained civilization, and the United States, after close to two years of what can only be called wrenching military nationalism under the charismatic Woodrow Wilson, was brought at last into the modern world of nations. State loyalties and appeals to states’ rights would not vanish overnight; they aren’t gone yet in constitutional law, and aren’t likely to be. But whereas prior to 1914 one still saw the gravamen of American development in the four dozen states, “provinces” in European terms, by 1920, it had shifted to the national culture, with the states becoming increasingly archaic.

The Great War, unwanted by any nation, even Germany, unexpected, really, until it burst devastatingly and irreversibly upon Europe, was at its height by far the largest, bloodiest, cruellest, indeed most savage in history. Churchill wrote:

All the horrors of all the ages were brought together, and not only armies but whole populations were thrust into the midst of them. . . . Neither peoples nor rulers drew the line at any deed which they thought would help them to win. Germany, having let Hell loose, kept well in the van of terror; but she was followed step by step by the desperate and ultimately avenging nations she had assailed. Every outrage against humanity or international law was repaid by reprisals—often of a greater scale and of longer duration. No truce or parley mitigated the strife of the armies. The wounded died between the lines: the dead mouldered in the soil. Merchant ships and neutral ships and hospital ships were sunk on the seas and all on board left to their fate or killed as they swam. Every effort was made to starve whole nations into submission without regard to age or sex. Cities and monuments were smashed by artillery. Bombs from the air were cast down indiscriminately. Poison gas in many forms stifled or seared their bodies. Liquid fire was projected upon their bodies. Men fell from the air in flames, or were smothered, often slowly, in the dark recesses of the sea. The fighting strength of armies was limited only by the manhood of their countries. Europe and large parts of Asia and Africa became one vast battlefield on which after years of struggle not armies but nations broke and ran. When all was over, Torture and Cannibalism were the only two expedients that the civilized, scientific, Chris-
tian States had been able to deny themselves: and they were of doubtful utility.*

The greatest single yield of the First World War was, however, none of the above; it was the Second World War, which came a bare quarter of a century after the First, germinated and let loose by the appalling consequences of 1918, chief among them the spawning of the totalitarian state, first in Russia, then in Italy and, crucially in the end, in Germany under Hitler. World War II was fought, of course, on a much wider front, or set of fronts, than its predecessor. There was no part of the globe that was not touched in one way or other. From the Second World War, officially ended in late 1945, has come a rash of wars during the last forty years, chief among them the Cold War between the Soviet Union and the United States. But we should not overlook the dozens of other wars fought during this period, in Asia, Africa, the Middle East, the Far East, Oceania, and so on. Between the last shot fired in 1945 and the present moment, war, somewhere at some time, has been the rule, peace the exception.

There is every reason for referring to the “Seventy-Five Years War” of the twentieth century, for that is about the length of the period of wars that began in 1914 and, with only brief punctuations of peace, continues through this year, certainly the next, and to what final ending? In so referring to twentieth-century war, we are only following the precedent of what we read routinely in our textbooks of European history about the Hundred Years War at the end of the Middle Ages. That war also had its punctuations of peace, or at least absence of overt hostilities.

War is indeed hell in just about every one of its manifestations through history. But for human beings during the past several thousand years it has plainly had its attractions, and also its boons for humanity. The general who said it is “good that war is so hideous; otherwise we should become too fond of it” spoke knowingly of the mental “wealth” that inheres in most wars along with the mental and physical “illth.” So practical and pragmatic a mind as William James believed that we needed a “moral equivalent of war” as the means of attaining the good qualities of war without entailing the evil ones.

Without wars through the ages, and the contacts and intermixtures of peoples they—and for countless aeons they alone—instigated, humanity would quite possibly be mired in the torpor and sloth, the fruits of cultural and mental isolation, with which its history begins. Before trade and commerce broke down cultural barriers and yielded crossbreeding of ideas as well as genetic systems, wars were the sole agencies of such crossbreeding. Individualism, so vital to creativity, was born of mingling of peoples, with their contrasting cultural codes—the very diversity aiding in the release of individuals from prior localism and parochialism, always the price of cultural insularity.

War and change—political and economic foremost, but social and cultural not far behind—have been linked in America from the beginning. War was the necessary factor in the birth of the new American republic, as it has been in the birth of every political state known to us in history. War, chiefly the Civil War, in U.S. history has been a vital force in the rise of industrial capitalism, in the change of America from a dominantly agrarian and pastoral country to one chiefly manufacturing in nature. War, in focusing the mind of a country, stimulates inventions, discoveries, and fresh adaptations. Despite its manifest illth, war, by the simple fact of the intellectual and social changes it instigates, yields results which are tonic to advancement.

By all odds, the most important war in U.S. history, the war that released the greatest number and diversity of changes in American life, was the Great War, the war that began in Europe in August 1914 and engulfed the United States in April 1917. Great changes in America were immediate. In large measure these changes reflected a release from the sense of isolation, insularity, and exceptionalism that had suffused so much of the American mind during the nineteenth century. The early Puritans had seen their new land as a “city upon a hill” with the eyes of the world on it. It was not proper for the New World to go to the Old for its edification; what was proper was for the Old World, grown feeble and hidebound, to come to America for inspiration. A great deal of that state of mind entered into what Tocqueville called the “American Religion,” a religion compounded of Puritanism and ecstatic nationalism.

What we think of today as modernity—in manners and morals as well as ideas and mechanical things—came into full-blown existence in Europe in the final part of the nineteenth century, its centers such cities as London, Paris, and Vienna. In contrast America was a “closed” society, one
steeped in conventionality and also in a struggle for identity. This was how many Europeans saw America and it was emphatically how certain somewhat more sophisticated and cosmopolitan Americans saw themselves. The grand tour was a veritable obligation of better-off, ambitious, and educated Americans—the tour being, of course, of Europe.

Possibly the passage of American values, ideas, and styles from “closed” to “open,” from the isolated to the cosmopolitan society, would have taken place, albeit more slowly, had there been no transatlantic war of 1914–1918. We can’t be sure. What we do know is that the war, and America’s entrance into it, gave dynamic impact to the processes of secularization, individualization, and other kinds of social-psychological change which so drastically changed this country from the America of the turn of the century to the America of the 1920s.

War, sufficiently large, encompassing, and persisting, is one of the most powerful media of social and cultural—and also material, physical, and mechanical—change known to man. It was in circumstances of war in primordial times that the political state arose, and at the expense of the kinship order that had from the beginning been the individual’s sole community. Ever since, war has had a nourishing effect upon the state; it is “the health of the state,” Randolph Bourne observed darkly but accurately, when America went to war in 1917. Werner Sombart, historian of capitalism, devoted a volume to the tonic effects of war on the rise and development of capitalism. But no less true is Max Weber’s pronouncement of war and the barracks life of warriors as the true cause of communism. War communism precedes, indeed gives birth to, civil communism, Weber argued. The Communism of Soviet Russia has been based from the very beginning upon war preparation, upon the Red Army and its absolute power in the Soviet state.

War tends to stimulate intellectual and cultural ferment if only because of the mixture of ideas and values that is a by-product of combat, of victory and defeat, in any war. In both world wars, millions of Americans, men and women alike, knew the broadening and enriching effects of travel abroad, of stations in exotic places for the first time, as the result of enlistment or conscription. Granted that some were killed. Far more were not.

War tends to break up the cake of custom, the net of tradition. By so doing, especially in times of crisis, it allows the individual a better chance of being seen and heard in the interstices, in the crevasses opened by the cracking up of old customs, statuses, and conventionalities. This was remarkably