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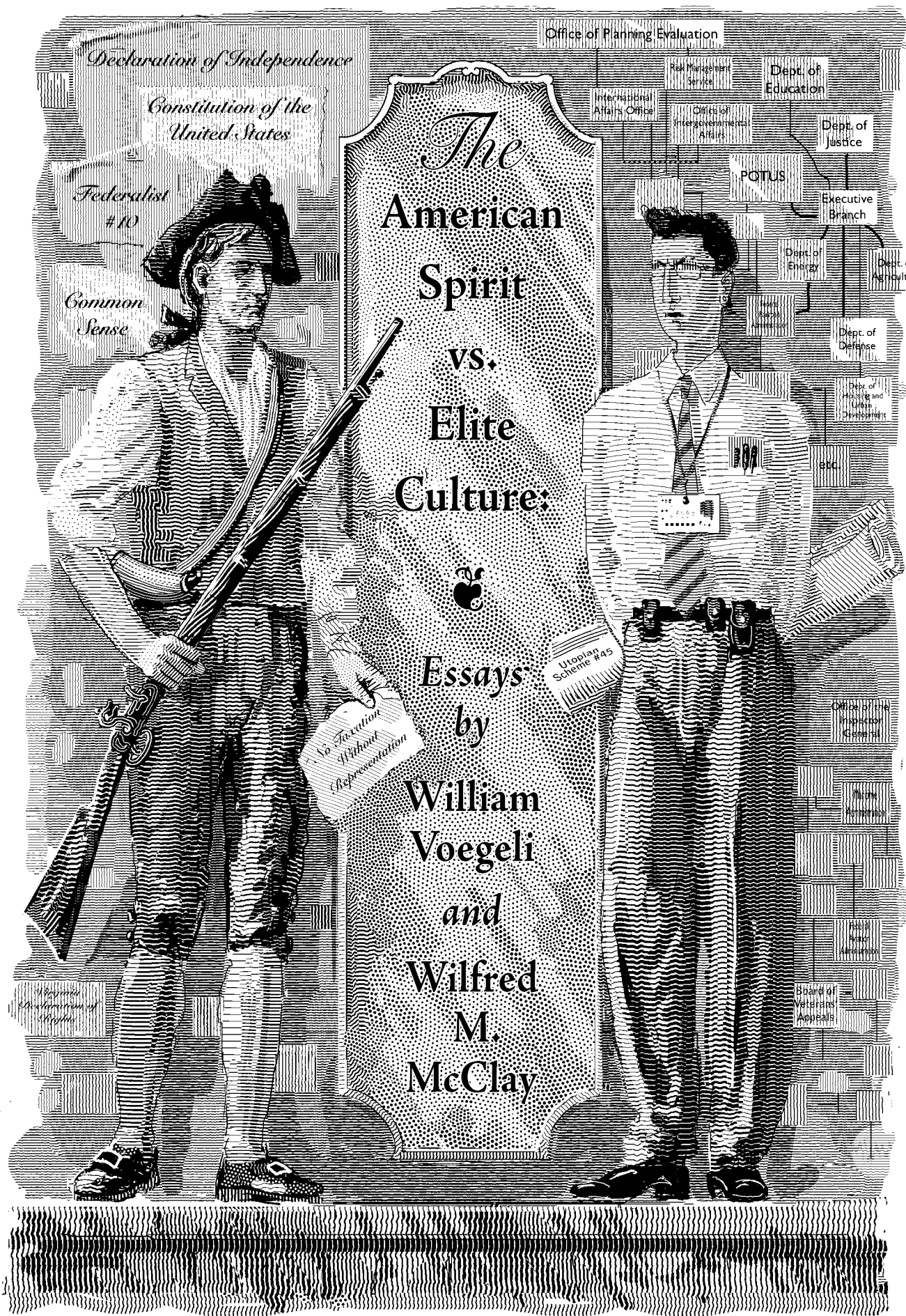
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Book Review by Fred Siegel

INSATIABLE LIBERALISM

Never Enough: America's Limitless Welfare State, by William Voegeli.
Encounter Books, 310 pages, \$23.95



PRESIDENT OBAMA'S VERTIGINOUS FALL from political grace, and the corresponding ascent of the Tea Party movement, have been the subject of extensive discussion. Strikingly, the account that sheds the most light on these developments mentions neither. William Voegeli's new book, *Never Enough: America's Limitless Welfare State*, was written just before Obama's outsized liberal aspirations provoked the Tea Parties to emerge. But it provides far and away the most substantial explanation to date of our current political condition.

Liberalism's most acute critics such as University of Virginia political scientist James Ceaser emphasize the centrality of crises, real or manufactured, in expanding the size and reach of the liberal state (as in the recent case of the supposedly imminent global warming catastrophe). In *Never Enough*, Voegeli, a visiting scholar at Claremont McKenna College's Henry Salvatori Center and a contributing editor of this journal, points to a complementary concept: liberalism, he argues, "lacks a limiting principle." This boundlessness, as it might be described, is familiar to Americans across the country who have watched, for instance, secondary school costs and college tuitions grow at roughly twice the rate of inflation for a quarter-century now. This boundlessness generates some of the apprehension that animates the Tea Parties. As a friend

asked me rhetorically—referring to the fact that the failing schools in Washington, D.C., spend \$28,000 a year per pupil while Harvard tuition costs \$34,000 a year—"When will enough be enough?" The same question could be asked regarding federal and state spending. Liberals, Voegeli explains, sometimes avoid trying to answer these sorts of questions by execrating as greedy racists those who ask them.

Liberals found a warrant for expansive government in their reconceptualization of the American republic. *The Federalist* had grounded government and rights in the imperfections of human nature. The proto-liberals of the Progressive era, who had drunk deeply of Darwinism, disposed of the notion of an inherent human nature. Like Woodrow Wilson, they were done with "blind" worship of the Constitution. Their concept of rights flowed from the felt necessities of history as it unfolded. History required, as Wilson argued, that "[t]he government of a country so vast and various must be strong, prompt, wieldy and efficient." Highly trained, disinterested experts, the products of university education, were to wield this powerful instrument untethered from Madisonian restraints and guided by visionary insight into the direction of history. Of course, notes Voegeli, "the dubious authority asserted by those who claim they can see farther over the horizon than

the rest of us is, among other things, a way to make their own political preferences cast a bigger shadow."

THOSE EXERCISING THE NEW SCIENCE OF government would (the Progressives argued) break with tradition through social experiments. And they would be bound, as a matter of disinterested intellectual honesty, by the outcomes of those experiments. In his 1932 Oglethorpe University Address, Franklin Roosevelt famously called for "bold, persistent experimentation" as a matter of "common sense." He promised that he would try one method and "if it fails, admit it frankly and try another." But when the corporatist program he adopted with the National Recovery Administration (NRA) failed to stimulate the Depression economy, it was ended not by an administration willing to acknowledge its errors, but by the Supreme Court. The *New Republic's* Jonathan Chait still peddles this shopworn argument, insisting that because liberalism is "rooted in experimentation and the rejection of ideological certainty" "everything works on a case-by-case basis." But as Voegeli notes, there is from the NRA to AFDC no known example of this adherence to the experimental method.

If the outcomes disappointed, Progressives could always claim good intentions. This now



hoary claim received its classic formulation in FDR's 1936 "Rendezvous with Destiny" speech to the Democratic National Convention. "Divine justice," he insisted, "weighs the sins of the cold-blooded and the sins of the warm-hearted on different scales. Better the occasional faults of a government that lives in a spirit of charity than the consistent omissions of a government frozen in the ice of its own indifference." But as the writers of *The Federalist* clearly understood, self-interest so overwhelms evidence that no program will be deemed an unambiguous failure as long as it provides employment for those who work in it. That last category—those who work in government—has proved crucial for the Progressive project.

Neoliberals such as Charles Peters of the *Washington Monthly* tried in the 1980s and '90s to provide liberalism with a limiting principle. For Peters, neoliberals were Democrats who were "against a fat, sloppy and smug bureaucracy." "We want a government," he insisted, "that can fire people who can't or won't do the job." For a time President Clinton straddled the line between neoliberals and statist liberals, explaining that "more government is not an aim in itself." But the Clinton presidency, for all his electoral success, was for liberals merely an interregnum. Clintonism was denounced for failing to expand the welfare state, which was deemed the true purpose of an increasingly liberal Democratic Party. After Clinton, Voegeli explains, liberalism returned to the belief that "every genuine need corresponds to a right to have that need addressed." Or in other words, "every problem deserves a program," and since there is no end of problems, there must be an ever expanding public-sector work force. In the first decade of the 21st century, public-sector workers, with their propensity to expand the state out of their own self-interest, became central players in the Democratic Party.

After John Kerry's defeat in 2004, Michael Tomasky, then-editor of the liberal monthly the *American Prospect*, tried to introduce the limiting principle of "the common good" into liberalism. As a writer for the *Village Voice* and *New York* magazine, Tomasky had observed firsthand the self-destruction of David Dinkins's liberal mayoralty (1989–93) in New York, and he was disturbed by the tendency of rights claims to trump all other considerations. The rights of criminals and welfare recipients, he noted, flourished even as the city declined. Putting a more positive face on his call for the politics of "the common good" in the *American Prospect*, Tomasky argued that Democrats have "a more than respectable roster of policy proposals" but they lack "a philosophy, a big idea that unites their proposals and converts them from a hodgepodge of narrow and specific fixes

into a vision for society." But Tomasky's efforts to promote a "common good" liberalism were overwhelmed by the interest-group energies unleashed by the 2004 Howard Dean presidential bid, energies which in turn helped propel Barack Obama to the White House.

WHY HAS LIBERALISM BEEN UNABLE TO constrain itself—why does it repeatedly overreach? Voegeli touches on this question only in passing references to liberalism's sense of itself as endowed with a secular but nonetheless consecrated mission. He notes that in the midst of the 1950s prosperity Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., called on liberalism to "fight spiritual unemployment as it once fought economic unemployment." And Voegeli perceptively notes the continuity between the aims of the Great Society and the Aquarians of the New Left. As Lyndon Johnson explained, the Great Society was about more than fighting poverty; it wanted to "build a richer life of mind and spirit," a society not "condemned to a soulless wealth" but one where "man turned the exploits of his genius to the full enrichment of his life."

Far more than contemporary liberals like to acknowledge, liberalism was born of something like a full-fledged ideology. Liberalism's seminal preceptors in America—Herbert Croly, Randolph Bourne, and H.G. Wells—saw it as a doctrine capable of competing with the other 20th-century "isms" of socialism, Bolshevism, and fascism. Liberalism, which distinguished itself in part by its call (not always respected) for freedom of thought, was joined to the other isms by its unattainable quest for a secular soteriology, a political path to salvation. Like the others, modern liberalism was born of a new class of politically self-conscious intellectuals who despised both the individual businessman's pursuit of profit and the average individual's pursuit of a conventional life, both of which were made possible by the linements of the limited 19th-century state. Like the others, liberalism was strongly influenced by the Nietzschean ideal of a true aristocracy that might serve as a counterpoint to what were seen as the debasements of modern commercial society shorn of traditional hierarchies.

"Democracy," said liberalism's pre-eminent founding father Herbert Croly, "must stand or fall on a platform of possible human perfectibility." These were the words of a radical, not a reformer—a man who, like Karl Marx and Auguste Comte, saw himself as leading humanity to a higher and more refined stage of civilization. Croly wanted the collective power of society put "at the service of its ablest members," who would be given the lead roles in the social drama of Progress. Boundlessness is built into the DNA of American liberalism.

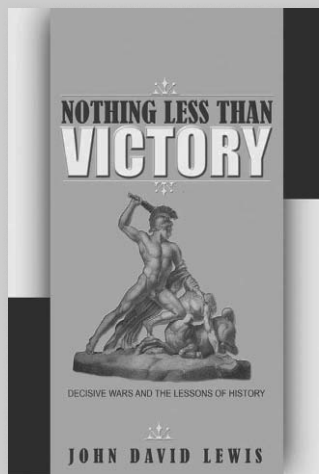
Liberalism was to be a new covenant in which the priests of Progress led the people into the promised land of a full blown European-style welfare state. But in the intervening century, two of the key building blocks of liberalism—namely the concept of Progress and the popular appeal of government—have become problematic, the first for liberals themselves and the second for much of the populace.

The rise of the environmental movement was the death knell for traditional liberal notions of Progress. Success was reconceptualized as averting one version or another of the supposedly imminent apocalypse—the population bomb, nuclear winter, global warming, etc. As for the adoration of government, the new aristocracy envisioned by Croly, Bourne, and Wells was supposed to be composed of superior people who acted disinterestedly through the centralized state in the name of advancing humanity. But a century later the landscape is littered with expensive programs and institutions created to advance that vision, many of which have less than glorious records.

Still, as Voegeli makes clear, government has continued its relentless expansion. Voegeli's conservative hopes are chastened by the fact that the United State has, when it comes to social spending, become less of an exceptional nation. Notwithstanding Reaganism and the rise of the conservative movement, the American trend from 1980–2007 has been a steady growth in the percentage of the economy devoted to the welfare state, a percentage in line with almost all modern developed democracies.

Liberals have continued to expand government on a federal, state, and local level through a very effective game of misdirection. By clouding the skies "with criss-crossing dollars," Voegeli explains, "the welfare state manages people's perceptions of its costs and benefits to encourage them to believe an impossibility: that every household can be a net importer of the wealth redistributed by the government." Liberals have thus devoted great efforts to making benefits overt and costs covert, taxes on the very wealthy excepted. The problem with this approach is that states such as California, New York, and New Jersey that adopt this supposedly win-win game of redistribution have ended up hemorrhaging educated, middle class, and high-income taxpayers. The upshot is that even the net beneficiaries of such cross-subsidies may end up feeling short-changed in the process. In New York City, teachers who have benefited from wage increases that are double the rate of inflation find that they still can't afford the rents in a city that raises the cost of housing by subsidizing not only poor but also middle-income households.

One response would be for liberals to support the means-testing of social benefits. But when



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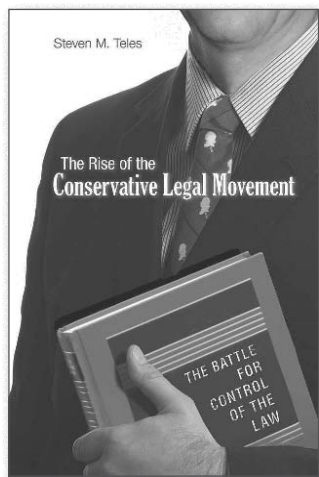
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—Dahlia Lithwick, *Slate*

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Charles Peters argued for this he was shouted down. Liberals felt the game of cross-subsidies, notwithstanding their expense and dysfunction, was crucial to attaching the middle class to an expanding state. The upshot, as in the fight over Obamacare, is that the liberals are increasingly committed to a lack of transparency.

Voegeli’s response to the continued expansion of the federal government social-welfare expenditures is two-fold. First, he argues, instead of talking about the evils of big government, Americans need to ask why the welfare state regularly produces bad government. In that vein, he can point to a deep blue state like New Jersey, which has one of the highest tax burdens in the country to fund its redistributive programs; nearly half of the roads in this suburban state are in disrepair, compared to the national average of 13%. Secondly, Voegeli hopes that government will learn to use to best advantage the resources the American people *are* willing to devote to the welfare state.

FOR ALL OF VOEGELI’S GOOD SENSE, MATTERS may not be as bleak as he suggests. Three important dynamics may end up serving to restrain the growth of government. In their ascending order of importance:

First, liberalism has long been fueled by the complex interaction between grievances and guilt. At their best, liberals are sensitive to real grievances. Conservatives rightly point to the underside of the Progressives’ attack on the Constitution. But in discussing the Progressive era conservatives such as Voegeli rarely deal with the extensive suffering produced by rapid industrialization. Unlike contemporary academic liberals, the Progressives didn’t have to sniff out oppression in the obscure corners of unintelligible texts. They could point to the all-too visible reality of child labor. The grievances of the suffering were a legitimate weight on the guilty consciences of Progressives. Similarly, the moral high point of modern liberalism came between the mid-1950s and the mid-1960s when liberals took the lead in opposing segregation. But, notes Voegeli, the notion of “[r]ights, which aren’t grounded in nature but determined by the evolving flow of history” allowed liberals “to quickly pivot from color blindness to racial preferences.” In the years since color blindness was replaced by affirmative action, liberal guilt and victim group grievance have danced a *pas de deux*. In this ballet the leaders of aggrieved groups have pushed liberals to assuage their anger, real or contrived, by imposing costs on the unorganized middle class, while not incidentally creating public-sector jobs for liberals who are then employed to ride righteous herd on the racist, sexist, and classist masses.

But the current attempt to stage a version of the liberal ballet on health care has been a notorious flop, despite the passage of Obamacare. The New Deal and the Great Society both took hold in eras without mass immigration. The attempt to expand the welfare state loses legitimacy in the midst of public anxiety about how to secure our borders. Most Americans see Obamacare as welfare of sorts, a transfer of resources from long-time citizens to new arrivals. The public is neither sufficiently guilty, nor the grievances of the “victims” sufficiently compelling, for the dynamic to work. New immigrants, a substantial number of whom are illegal, don’t engage the sympathies of moderately liberal swing voters whose acquiescence is essential for liberal schemes.

Second, liberalism has long prided itself on its high-mindedness, its disinterested concern for the public good. It counterpoised itself to the money-grubbing interests of petty bourgeois individualism. But its increasing dependence on the political muscle of public-sector workers makes the claim of high-mindedness unsalable. Thanks to the fiscal crunch that has taken hold largely but not entirely in the Blue States, the public has become increasingly aware of the fact that public-sector workers are better compensated both in terms of salary and benefits than their private sector counterparts.

Third, liberalism in Voegeli’s words is “having trouble meeting payroll” in a federal system in which the middle class can exit for greener pastures. The rise of public-sector union political power has produced a rapid rise in pension costs which are exacerbating the costs of paying for social welfare programs. Consider again, for example, deep blue liberal New Jersey which hasn’t elected a Republican senator since 1976 and which, until this year, hadn’t elected a Republican statewide official since 1997. In February 2008 the *New York Times* hailed New Jersey as the Northeast’s most Progressive state. But between 2000 and 2008 that “Progressivism” cost the state 163,000 native households and \$12.8 billion in gross income. The upshot was the election of a Republican Governor, Chris Christie, who threw down this unprecedented gauntlet: “If you are unemployed and support tax increases, be ready to stay unemployed. If you are working and support the job killing taxes that some will advocate today, you may be next to lose your job.”

This year, the insatiability of public-sector demands in New Jersey produced an \$11 billion deficit in a \$29 billion budget. That gap was created because the price of state and local taxes per person had tripled in the past 20 years. Governor Christie has been compelled to challenge the public-sector unions not only on the state but also the local level as never before:



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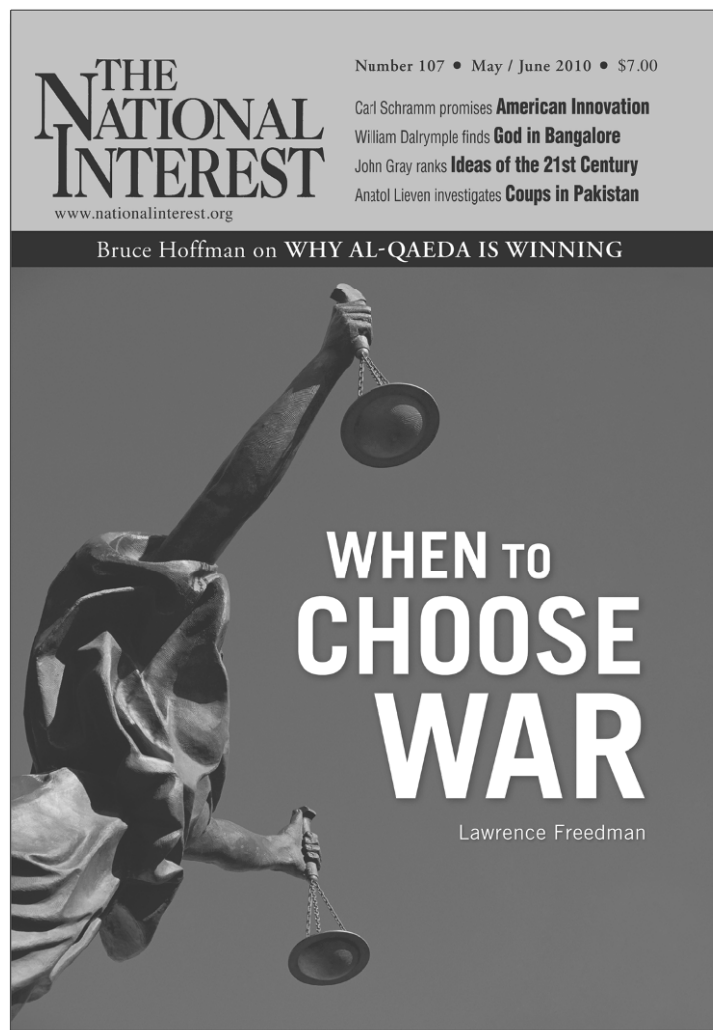
Christie asked, "is it fair to have any public employees getting 4-5% salary increases every year, even when inflation is zero percent, paid for by citizens struggling" to make ends meet? In his opening bargaining position with the Democrat-dominated legislature, he proposed to close the largest budget gap (percentage-wise) in the nation almost entirely with cuts out of public spending. And to clear the sky of some of those criss-crossing subsidies, Christie has proposed means-testing of sorts by ending all state aid to the wealthiest school districts. Christie is sure to face stiff interest-group opposition, but right now he has public opinion behind him, and should he make significant headway his posture is likely to be imitated in the many state capitals facing similar circumstances.

BOUNDLESSNESS, IT TURNS OUT, HAS TO BE paid for, as we're about to discover when we start shelling out for the federal takeover of the health industry. Further, with a pension tsunami coming toward the states and localities, any attempt to expand government on the state and local level is likely to be met not only with stiff resistance but, in a federal system of states forced to compete globally, with serious attempts to reduce the cost of government. The coming years may well be politically dominated by intertwining attempts, on every level of government, to roll back the state.

Never Enough, the best book written on liberalism in recent decades, is an essential read for understanding how we came to this pass. It articulates the understandings of what the Tea Partiers fear and denounce but aren't able to explain. What's missing, however, is the sense of how liberalism transformed itself over time from believing in the possibilities of human perfectibility, to believing in government as an inexhaustible source of patronage and entitlements. The rapaciousness of this new framework may undermine itself. If so, Voegeli's well-argued critique will have been too pessimistic.

Fred Siegel is professor of history and humanities at The Cooper Union, and author of The Prince of the City: Giuliani, New York and the Genius of American Life (Encounter Books).

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