

THE DECLINE OF  
AMERICAN LIBERALISM

BY

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*with a Foreword by Robert Higgs*



# Foreword to the 2009 Edition

*Robert Higgs*

AS A HISTORIAN and as a person, Arthur A. Ekirch, Jr., spent his life swimming against the current. In an era when the classical liberalism he espoused was falling into ever greater disfavor among the general public and virtually disappearing from the history profession, he devoted great energy to a style of scholarship that brought him much less recognition and reward than he deserved. Yet, despite the heavy odds against him, he fought the good fight throughout his career.

By employing the expression “fought the good fight,” however, we risk a grave misrepresentation of a core element in Ekirch’s life and scholarship, which was his antipathy to militarism. Deeply influenced in his youth by the revisionist historical scholarship on World War I, he did not join the “liberal” stampede of the late 1930s and early 1940s to support Franklin D. Roosevelt’s belligerent foreign policy. Instead, after passage of the Selective Service Act of 1940, he registered as a conscientious objector. To let him know how much his fealty to pacific principles was appreciated, the government conscripted him late in 1943 and forced him to work for two years without pay, first as a logger and then as an attendant in a school for the mentally retarded. Ekirch rightly considered himself to have been a political prisoner during that time, and the experience of his forced labor left a deep imprint on him for the remainder of his life.

Just before his conscription, he had completed work for his Ph.D. in history at Columbia University. After the war, he taught briefly at Hofstra University (1946–47), then at American University (1947–65), and finally at the State University of New York, Albany (1965–86). During his career, he wrote ten books, edited an anthology, and published scores of articles and book reviews. Of his writings, *The Decline of American Liberalism*, first published in 1955, may well be considered his greatest achievement.

Unlike the historians who saw either cycles of liberal advance and conservative reaction or a steady progression toward liberal ascendancy in American history, Ekirch argued that liberalism reached its apogee in this country at the time of the War of Independence and that despite a certain amount of ebb and flow thereafter, the tendency was toward its decline. To understand this thesis, we must keep in mind that for Ekirch “liberalism” meant what we must now take care to describe as “classical liberalism,” a worldview and related doctrines that had developed during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in reaction against absolutist tyranny, religious and intellectual intolerance, and mercantilism—the liberalism of Locke, Voltaire, Smith, Jefferson, and de Tocqueville. During the past century, liberalism has not simply changed; it has become almost the opposite of what it was at the time of the American Revolution. Whereas the classical liberals were staunch individualists, today’s liberals, recently gone over to calling themselves “progressives” again, are collectivists who espouse restrictions on free expression and association and favor a degree of government intervention in the economy that would have embarrassed an eighteenth-century mercantilist. Unlike the classical liberals, who valued liberty above all, today’s liberals worship at the altar of democracy, heedless of that system’s manifest

corruption and its tendency toward Caesarism. “Freedom of the individual,” Ekirch insists on page one, “conflicts with such democratic principles as equality and majority rule.” Of these inconsistent principles, he consistently chose individual freedom, viewing democracy as, at best, a means to desirable ends.

As if the anti-liberal forces marshaled by Alexander Hamilton and the Federalists, and later by the Whigs and the Republicans, were not enough, liberals also had to contend repeatedly with the anti-liberal forces unleashed by war or serious threat of war. During the Quasi-War with France between 1798 and 1800, the government went so far as to enact the notorious Alien and Sedition Acts. Scarcely had these tendencies been quashed by Jefferson’s victory in the election of 1800 when the threat of war with Great Britain prompted the Jeffersonians themselves to take severely anti-liberal measures, such as the Embargo and Non-Intercourse Acts. These actions paled, of course, in comparison to the extreme anti-liberalism that prevailed on both sides during the War Between the States, when heavy taxation, conscription, and an enormous expansion of government spending and employment occurred along with suppression of civil rights and rampant violations of traditional liberties. After the war, Republican-dominated governments indulged in an orgy of corrupt subsidies to railroad companies and others, decimated the plains Indians and snatched their lands, and cemented a fragile system of national banks on the economy, fostering periodic financial panics and business recessions. In addition, from the 1880s on, American intellectuals began to find European collectivism attractive. Thus, as Ekirch writes, “the retreat of the liberals was well advanced by the turn of the century.” Yet, the prospects became only bleaker as the twentieth century passed.

Progressivism, which gained an influential following during the two decades before U.S. entry into World War I, seemed to some at the time to be itself a liberal development, but its liberal elements, such as they were, were soon submerged beneath the tendencies toward collectivist values and government intervention in the economy. As Ekirch writes, “the progressives were essentially nationalists, moving to a state socialism along European lines and owing relatively little to the American tradition of liberal individualism.” They were also the wave of the future, and their modes of thought became the persistent background of political debate and action from their time to the present. At the core of this style of thinking is the assumption that the government can effectively serve, and should serve, as the problem solver of first resort in economic and social life.

Adding great momentum to the progressive thrust of political thought and action in the twentieth century was the succession of national emergencies that provoked abrupt increases in the federal government’s size, scope, and power: World War I, the Great Depression, World War II, the episode encompassing the civil rights revolution and the Vietnam War between 1964 and 1974, and, perhaps, the present episode, encompassing the responses to 9/11 and to the current construction/credit/securities bust. In the aftermath of each great crisis, the government retained many of the “emergency” powers it had just gained, often in the guise of employing them for new or broader purposes. Thus, each such episode had a ratchet effect, and each constituted a further damaging assault on classical liberal ideas and policies. Ekirch’s narrative guides us smoothly through these historical rapids, up to the mid-1950s.

Although Ekirch drew on broad and deep learning, he expressed himself in clear, simple English. So straightforward

is his exposition that the reader may fail to appreciate how much substance the effortless language is conveying. Although Ekirch's thesis was, and remains, a challenging one, he never resorted to stridency or hyperbole, and he took care in choosing his words and in framing his evaluations and interpretations. Were he alive today to revise the text, he certainly would wish to make some changes in the light of the past half-century's scholarship, especially in economic history. Yet, all in all, the most striking thing is how well the book holds up after more than fifty years. Even now virtually every reader is sure to learn much from Ekirch's descriptions and evaluations. Even now, to my knowledge, no good substitute for *The Decline of American Liberalism* is available, and this new printing serves a valuable purpose by preserving and making conveniently available the great classical-liberal historian's most important contribution to American political and intellectual history.