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The age of Obama has been an age of revival for the Progressive ideal of a “national community.” It is a vision rooted in two core beliefs: that direct, local associations and channels of action are too often overwhelmed by the differences among communities and the fractious character of American public life; and that rather than strengthening the sources of these differences, modern government should seek to overcome them in the service of a coherent national ambition. By distributing the same benefits, protections, and services to all Americans, fellow feeling and neighborliness can be fostered among the public; combined with the power of the national government and professional expertise, this communal sentiment can then become a valuable weapon for attacking America’s most pressing social problems.

A century ago, this ideal was a central tenet of the Progressive agenda—which sought, as Progressive icon Herbert Croly put it in 1909, the “subordination of the individual to the demand of a dominant and constructive national purpose.” It was an important goal of the New Deal, which President Franklin Roosevelt described in 1933 as “extending to our national life the old principle of the local community.” It was the essence of the liberal agenda of the 1960s, which President Lyndon Johnson called an effort to “turn unity of interest into unity of purpose, and unity of goals into unity in the Great Society.” And it was at the core of Barack Obama’s campaign for the presidency in 2008, which promised to overcome petty differences and, as Obama put it in one campaign speech, to





ashamed of [their] language and culture.” Garcia thus became a fierce champion of what would later be described as “Chicano Power,” a posture that should have made him a prime recruit for liberalism. Furthermore, as an aggrieved Mexican-American who had fallen into drug addiction, he was a perfect candidate for the le’s approach to social dysfunction.

Garcia gave this approach a try when, desperate to conquer his addiction, he signed himself in to what was then called the U.S. Public Health Service Hospital for Narcotic Addicts in Fort Worth, Texas. For six months, as he put it, he “took every therapy they offered, determined not to leave ‘til [he] was cured.” But before Garcia had even returned home after his discharge, he had sought out a pusher and gotten high again.

Garcia tried to tackle his addiction once again by entering a local chapter of Teen Challenge, the national drug-addiction program founded by pastor David Wilkerson, author of *Jesus Calling*. There, Garcia was told that if he asked Jesus to forgive him for his sins, he would “be a drug addict no more, because Jesus want[ed him] to change [his] life right now.” And yet Garcia was reluctant to abandon liberalism’s social science. As he put it, “I argued with myself, I’ve tried the best hospitals, psychiatrists, psychologists, [and] group therapists. . . . How can Jesus, whom I can’t see, feel, or touch, change me?”

But prayer did change him. Garcia shed not only his heroin addiction but also his animus against Anglos. He went on to found Victory Fellowship, which would spawn scores of community ministries for the addicted, homeless, and lost across the United States and Latin America. Tens of thousands of copies of *On the Edge of the Abyss* — the autobiography he wrote with his wife, Ninfa — have been distributed in churches and prisons and on street corners around the world. And not long before Pastor Freddie’s passing last year, his ministry opened a \$3.6 million center in San Antonio for the application of faith to the problems of alcoholism and drug abuse.

Most conservatives have not heard Freddie Garcia’s name. And yet in his life and his ministry, he embodied conservative social policy at its best. His work did not rely on massive government expenditures for the purchase of costly professional expertise. Rather, in the best tradition of Tocqueville’s science of association, Garcia worked to construct small, tightly knit, nurturing faith communities for people whose addictions and incarcerations had long since driven them from the arms of family and friends. Summing up the changes that faith had made in the lives of those touched by Victory

Fellowship, Pastor Freddie said: “The miracle in our lives didn’t happen when we called upon the name of Socrates, Charles Darwin, Karl Marx, or Sigmund Freud. This transformation took place in our lives when we called upon the name of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.”

Naturally, the social-service establishment is not amused by such challenges to its hegemony. (Indeed, in 1995, the Texas Commission on Drug and Alcohol Abuse went after Teen Challenge of South Texas, threatening to put it out of business because its counselors lacked formal professional credentials.) After all, Pastor Freddie’s reliance on personal supplications to Jesus, and the healing power of prayer, could hardly be more opposed to the progressive establishment’s most cherished assumptions. Its credentialed professionals regard problems like addiction not as personal afflictions—to suggest as much is to “blame the victim”—but rather as the product of larger social forces like racism and poverty.

And the conviction that such forces could at last be understood and mastered by new sciences of society—such as psychology and sociology





John Judis and political scientist Ruy Teixeira argue — an emerging Democratic majority.

But we also know that, especially among Hispanics and African-

class nor by section nor by color, knowing no South or North, no East or West, but just one great America, free of malice and free of hate, and loving thy neighbor as thyself.”

Americans, however, began to see that the effort to build a utopian community meant the destruction of their own tangible and immediate communities. Whether the issue was crime, pornography, housing, abortion, prayer in school, textbooks, or busing, local customs and mores were being overturned by federal edict in the name of a single national standard. As a result, groups that had been the bedrock of the New Deal coalition—Southern evangelicals and ethnic, Catholic blue-collar workers—erupted into populist revolt, and suddenly came into political play.

But as with Pentecostals today, these groups were not persuaded by the established conservative intellectual schools. Blue-collar ethnics did



hierarchy, which had never treated his Slavic ancestors well; nor was it the unfettered free market, which had killed and maimed too many of his ethnic kindred in molten steel spills and methane-filled coal shafts. Rather, he called for a public policy that “[turned] toward the organic networks of communal life . . . family, ethnic groups, and voluntary associations in primary groups.”

Similarly, social entrepreneur Robert Woodson — who had been recruited directly from the Urban League — rejected the professionalized therapeutic state’s approach to working with youth gangs. At the same time, however, he rejected conservatism’s preference for throw-away-the-key law enforcement. Rather, in his AEI volume *A*

*Life*, he held up the model of Falaka Fattah and her House of Umoja in Philadelphia. Like Pastor Freddie, Fattah had created a small, intense community to keep neighborhood teens out of gang life, drawing on the example of the extended African family — hardly the typical conservative point of reference.

Novak and Woodson both proposed as an alternative to the progressive state —



to learn more about this notion of mediating structures; he also named Garcia to a faith-based task force to explore ways social services could be provided through grassroots groups. When Bush ran for president five

runs through the Democratic Party, separating a passionately religious populism from an equally dispassionate professional elitism, each now with major claims upon a revived service-delivery state. Consider, for

critics in ways that we cannot now fully anticipate, but which we should welcome all the same.

should formulate the next round of mediating-structures proposals by seeking out and tapping the wisdom of inner-city grassroots leaders. As Pastor Freddie's life demonstrated, no one can tell us more than they about the manifest failures of the social-service state, because they have seen and experienced these failures first-hand. They can also tell us precisely what changes — often amounting to minor, low-cost adjustments — could be made in existing laws and regulations to simplify life for people who are truly solving social problems. Unlike large, bureaucratic non-profits, about the last thing grassroots groups are likely to suggest is a new, complex, expensive, government-run social program. They already know how that story turns out.

Of course, one of the most important questions to think through in any attempt at revival is how all of this attention to grassroots community groups will help conservatism speak to the rest of America



not only the problems of poverty and social dysfunction, but at the same time costly and intrusive social-service programs that often only make the problems worse.

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