

Note from the Editor

In contemplating the inglorious departures last year of Jacques Chirac and Tony Blair, commentators turned to versions of the aphorism coined by the nationalistic British politician, Enoch Powell, in his 1977 biography of Joseph Chamberlain: “All political lives, unless they are cut off in midstream at a happy juncture, end in failure, because that is the nature of politics and of human affairs.” The ready resort to versions of Powell’s remark inspired an essayist for the British newspaper, the *Guardian*, to reflect that a “successful aphorism” has the “power to provoke an interpretation,” even when, as in this case, it is empirically untrue. (We can all cite examples of politicians who retired voluntarily accompanied by widespread praise.) At the start of this election year—with much about our nation that needs transforming and with people yearning for a transformative politician—it behooves us to recall how often politicians disappoint themselves and others. Especially after the accession of Theodore Roosevelt in 1901, as readers of this journal know, the tendency accelerated to look toward the presidency for inspiration and guidance. And readers of this journal also know how difficult it was even before 1901 for a mortal president to perform satisfactorily in a job that was still in the main political and administrative, with little expectation of Weberian charisma.

None of the essays in this issue concerns a president, but all of them revolve around the failure of a transformative political vision. David Montgomery and Joel Sipress fill out the stories of two fairly well-known such failures. Montgomery provides a detailed, memorable account of the American Federation of Labor’s abandonment of its aim, espoused in the 1890s, of linking together the peoples of the Western Hemisphere through a vigorous, independent labor movement. Rather than an alternative to the Western Hemisphere activities of the United States government, the AFL became an adjunct to these. Dedicated Populists such as Louisiana’s Hardy L. Brian, as Sipress explains, embraced a transformative vision of politics. The mere reformism and conventional party politics for which Brian eventually settled were disappointing shadows of his original goals.

As Gail Gelburd recounts, artist John Sloan’s political failure was tentative, perhaps not failure at all. At a key moment in his development, Socialist Party politics provided Sloan with inspiration and opportunity. Sloan, Robert Henri, and their colleagues among the urban realists known as the Ash Can School for a time embraced the powerful but troubling notion that artists should use their skills to transform political consciousness. Despite his celebrated contributions to Socialist publications such as the *New York Call* and the *Masses*, Sloan ultimately resisted pressure to make his art a visual representation of a party doctrine. Max Eastman, the *Masses* editor who

quarreled with Sloan over artistic expression versus political regularity, would later re-earn his reputation as a flamboyant champion of freedom of sentiment and thought the hard way, by resisting Josef Stalin's lackeys and exposing his apologists.

In a highly original article, Thomas Pegram traces how one formidable mass movement dealt with the wreck of its transformative vision and wrestled with the moral temptations of frustration. Around the country during the 1920s, prominent members of the Anti-Saloon League collaborated with the Ku Klux Klan precisely because the Klan's vigilantism and intolerance seemed a way to force adherence to a faltering Prohibition. The ASL overall, however, resisted alliance with the Klan. Despite the clear link between evangelical Protestantism and dry sentiment by the mid-1920s, the ASL could not totally abandon the ecumenical aspect of its dream of a nation uplifted through sobriety. At least some segments of the ASL were willing to accept defeat if the means of success would be too compromising.

Alan Lessoff