

EDITOR'S NOTE: *The editors invited Mr. Suttle to review the books listed below because they describe early progressive instincts and voting behavior of Oklahomans, as well as many other Americans, who felt their country was being overtaken by oligarchs.*

Doris Kearns Goodwin. 2013. *The Bully Pulpit: Theodore Roosevelt, William Howard Taft, and the Golden Age of Journalism*. Simon & Schuster. 909 pages.

Edmund Morris. 2011. *Colonel Roosevelt*. Random House. 706 pages.

James Chase. 2004. *1912: Wilson, Roosevelt, Taft, Debs—The Election That Changed the Country*. Simon & Schuster. 323 pages.

These three recent publications have shed additional light on the beginnings of social democracy in the United States. To be sure, slow progress had already been made by 1912, such as forming the Food and Drug Administration, creating the Bureau of Labor within the Department of Commerce and Labor, and establishing other agencies and reforms; but the progressive steps that have become part and parcel of our current social fabric began to emerge in 1912 with the bitter fight between the conservative industrial-banking interests and progressive elements of the Republican Party.

These books present a intriguing history of the 1912 presidential election. Taken together they advance the theory that the split between President Taft's regulars and President Roosevelt's progressives—first within the Republican Party and later as the insurgent Bull Moose Party—tore the GOP to pieces. These conflicts set the tone for a century of strife within the party, the echoes of which are still vibrating today. The split certainly led to the election of Woodrow Wilson and comfortable Democratic majorities in both houses of Congress. Given the combined Taft/Roosevelt popular vote, it seems unlikely that Wilson would have carried a single state outside the South, including his home state of New Jersey. Had

Roosevelt been the Republican nominee (the only thing Taft was determined to prevent—and did) he would have won in a walk.

Wilson and his Democratic Congress's record of reform is well known. His presidency yielded many industrial reforms such as the eight-hour day for railway workers and child labor laws, as well as the Federal Reserve System to regulate the currency, women's suffrage, direct election of U. S. Senators, the income tax, limiting corporate campaign contributions, prosecuting trusts, and establishing the Federal Trade Commission.

An interesting side note to all of this is that Oklahoma was the reddest of states as that term was understood in 1912. Wilson won Oklahoma with 46% of the vote to Taft's 36%. For reasons that should be further explored, Oklahoma was the only state in which Roosevelt's Progressive Party was not on the ballot. Perhaps most interesting is that America's most prominent socialist, Eugene V. Debs, received 16% of the vote in Oklahoma. Only Nevada's percentage was slightly higher. And just for the record, in bone-dry Oklahoma, the Prohibition Party candidate, Eugene Chaffin, got less than 1% of the vote.

It is largely forgotten today that the socialist and populist movements were an integral part of the political landscape during Oklahoma's formative years. Even the state motto, *Labor Omnia Vincit* ("Labor Conquers All Things"), was the title of an address made by Debs in 1895. The motto was also frequently used by unions and labor organizers. In early Oklahoma, several Socialist Party candidates were elected to local offices. Camps, meetings, instructional schools, and workers' rallies were common throughout much of the state. As late as the 1970s, the ballot symbol of the Socialist Party—an outstretched hand—could still be found along with the eagle and rooster in the Oklahoma election code enacted at statehood.

What became of Oklahoma's socialist roots? The small farmers, sharecroppers, industrial and railway workers, and miners comprised a natural constituency built by the Populist movement and William Jennings Bryan. Many likely turned towards the Socialist Party after Bryan's third defeat in 1908. A review of the 1912 Socialist Party platform, proposed in convention and ratified in a party plebiscite,

reveals such “radical” and “dangerous” ideas as women’s suffrage, prohibition against child labor, a shorter workday, a five and a half day workweek, old age pensions, a graduated income tax, inspection of workplaces, relief of unemployment through public works, initiative, referendum, recall, and conservation of natural resources. Admittedly, the platform also proposed some bizarre structural changes to state government, including abolition of the U. S. Senate, the presidential veto, the electoral college, and the entire lower federal judiciary, plus public ownership of railroads, telegraph and telephone facilities, stockyards, grain silos, mines, oil wells, and banks. Some of the more moderate of these progressive ideas were espoused by Roosevelt and Wilson during the campaign and later came to fruition with the New Deal. In retrospect, many of the proposals of the 1912 socialists seem perfectly reasonable and are generally accepted today as bedrock components of our current social contract.

As is well chronicled in Ernest Freeberg’s *Democracy’s Prisoner* (2008), the socialist movement in Oklahoma and elsewhere began to lose standing after 1912. Some of the reasons included its pacifist leanings during World War I and the oppressive suppression of free speech and press by the Wilson Administration. Local vigilantes, such as those who put down Oklahoma’s anti-conscription Green Corn Rebellion, were joined by official suppression at the hands of Attorney General Mitchell Palmer and Postmaster General Albert S. Burleson. A sentimental “last hurrah” occurred in 1920 when Debs, while serving time in federal prison for the crime of seditious speech, received nearly a million votes in the presidential election. Oklahoma, however, chose a return to “normalcy” as Warren Harding swept the state, reducing Debs’ vote total to 5%. Various philosophical fissures within the party—coupled with a public perception that blended the terms “socialist,” “anarchist,” and “communist” in the minds of the American people—served to weaken and eventually emasculate the party.

It is perhaps a final irony that to avoid the tag of “liberal” many of today’s left-leaning Democrats now style themselves as “progressives.” No doubt Roosevelt, Wilson and Debs would be proud of that. The sad observation, however, is that today’s

progressives spend more time defending assaults on these older social institutions than they do advancing new, progressive ideas and programs.

When the elements of the far right today accuse opponents of being “socialists” one is left to wonder what elements of this “socialism” conservatives want to abrogate. Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid, unemployment insurance, inspection of packing plants, interstate highways, workplace safety, environmental regulations, securities regulations, municipal golf courses? The current social democracy, which has been built brick by brick over the past one hundred years, is not likely to be undone. As historians Goodwin, Morris and Chase make clear in their recent books, it was constructed by popular consent—a cement that in this case has cured over generations. An attendant logic was advanced by Abraham Lincoln when he stated, “The legitimate object of government is to do for a community of people whatever they need to have done, but cannot do at all, or cannot so well do, for themselves—in their separate, and individual capacities.” And when all of this is turned to daily life, the argument is obvious. We simply cannot go to the grocery store and inspect our own meat, certify that our home’s electrical wiring meets safety standards, or determine on our own that the tap water is safe to drink.

Steven Suttle

Former Oklahoma District Attorney