power and sought to silence critics of Woodrow Wilson’s war effort and those who, like the founding members of the American Civil Liberties Union, considered freedom of speech inviolable. Both the division between progressive and conservative religious groups and the division between civil libertarians and those wary of unregulated speech and behavior have become increasingly deep—and more debilitating both politically and culturally for liberalism—over the last century.

In the 1920s, liberals’ pre–World War I interest in bringing scientific expertise to government continued unabated. The most celebrated hero of the war, the “great engineer” Herbert Hoover, abandoned Woodrow Wilson’s internationalism but continued to think of himself as a progressive keen on efficient management. First as secretary of commerce and then as president, Hoover oversaw a modified regulatory regime that purported to extend the progressives’ approach to government-business relations while surrendering decision making to the private sector. When that experiment in corporatism failed dramatically and the nation sank into depression, Franklin D. Roosevelt stumbled into half-hearted versions of progressive economic regulation while forging a coalition of voters that sustained his unstable brand of liberalism for several decades. Some members of Roosevelt’s administration embraced much more aggressive schemes of economic planning that would have expanded public control over the private sector to an unprecedented degree. But their efforts, like those of the most ambitious new liberals before them, crumpled in Congress under the assault of critics who characterized such plans as utopian, medieval, Communist, or Fascist.

When the United States was forced into World War II by Pearl Harbor, doctrinal disagreements no longer mattered as much. Spurred by the urgent need to produce military supplies as fast as possible, informal arrangements between government and business facilitated unprecedented economic growth. In the face of never before seen military dangers, government authorities curtailed the civil liberties of many Americans, particularly those of Japanese descent. At the end of the war, the United States faced a new world. Now the richest economy as well as the most powerful military in the world, the nation had to decide how to use its wealth and power. For several years Roosevelt had been developing a plan to meet that challenge, which he outlined in his 1944 State of the Union address and on which he campaigned for reelection that fall.

The Second Bill of Rights, as Roosevelt called his plan, was to include the right of every American to a job at a living wage, adequate food, clothing, housing, medical care, education, and “protection from the economic fears of old age, sickness, accident, and unemployment.” Similar programs of social provision took shape throughout the industrialized world. In almost all western European nations, through the
efforts of liberal and social democratic coalitions, they came to fruition. Roosevelt griped to Secretary of Labor Frances Perkins that the most visible of these schemes, England's Beveridge Plan, which served as the blueprint for Clement Attlee's postwar Labour government, should have been called the Roosevelt Plan. But the same forces that had stymied earlier liberal programs did the same to the Second Bill of Rights, which Congress dismantled in the wake of Roosevelt's death. Only a remnant of the plan survived in the form of the G.I. Bill. The benefits provided by even that limited measure fueled a sustained wave of prosperity that lasted three decades, and scholars of the Second Bill of Rights have been left wondering about its effect had Roosevelt lived to shepherd it into law.

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