

Our Own Good

BY TOM PALAIMA

Just How Stupid Are We? Facing the Truth About the American Voter

By Rick Shenkman

Basic Books

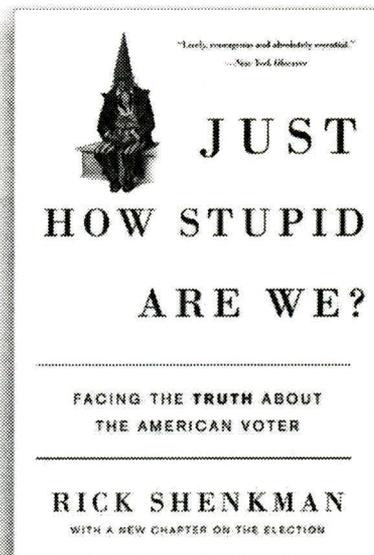
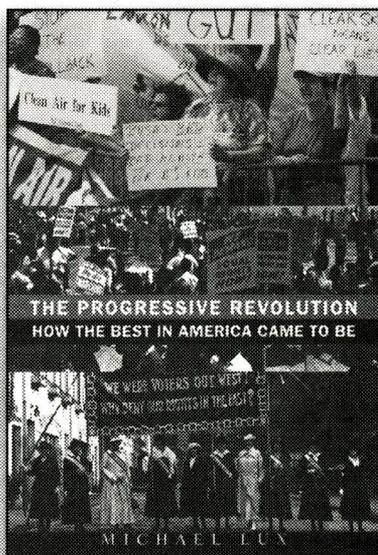
256 pages, \$14.95

The Progressive Revolution: How the Best in America Came to Be

By Michael Lux

John Wiley and Sons

256 pages, \$25.95



In the early 1970s, Rick Shenkman recalls, he “was tutored in the precepts of Russell Kirk, Leo Strauss and other conservative intellectuals who were openly hostile to the direction of American democracy” in a seminar sponsored by the right-wing Intercollegiate Studies Institute. The pessimism of conservative thought appealed to him, and conservatism made him feel like a rebel, made him want to “challenge the taboos of conventional (i.e., liberal) thinking” that then prevailed. Shenkman returned to progressivism around the time of Watergate, but his youthful walk on the right side gave him insight into the conservative mindset that continues to inform his thinking and writing, and partly explains his regular appearances on CNN and Fox News. He is well known as founder and editor of the History News Network (hnn.us), an excellent source of historical perspective on contemporary politics and culture.

Michael Lux locates the seeds of his commitment to progressive politics in the experiences of his boyhood. A choking incident left him with a mild form of cerebral palsy, making him slow and uncoordinated. In church, he came to understand the social responsibility message of compassionate Christianity. While he was in elementary school, his family hosted two families from apartheid-era Rhodesia. “Although I was too gimpy to protect them very well physically,” Lux

writes, “I knew it was my job to stand by them and be there when the bullies in my school screamed ‘nigger’ at them.”

The ancient Greeks believed we learn through hardship: *pathei mathein*. Lux has been a community organizer, worked on presidential campaigns and served as a senior staffer in the Clinton White House, specifically on the failed national health care reform initiative (*pathei mathein* in capital letters). He has since worked for People for the American Way and is president of a Washington-based political consulting firm. He helped launch the blog OpenLeft.com and writes regular columns for the Huffington Post. Lux is especially good at showing who loses when progressive ideals fail to win out.

Each author has his own reasons for feeling confident that if American voters were only better informed about the history and the implications of contemporary policy issues, and took their civic responsibilities more seriously, the country would be better off. Both stress that we go through periods, as laid out in Arthur Schlesinger Jr.’s *The Cycles of American History*, when conservatives assert, usually with a vengeance, their philosophy of private interest against the more liberal calling of public good. Given that relatively few Americans have wealth, power and privilege worth conserving, conservatives tend to hold power only when a good number of voters cast ballots in contradiction to their own best

interests. This is the paradoxical phenomenon that leads Shenkman to his interest in the American voter’s “stupidity.”

Lux tracks how Schlesinger’s theory of cycles plays out. Between 1776 and 2008, periods of forceful progressive change (the Civil War, the progressive income tax, the land-grant university system, the Homestead Act, Amendments 13-15, the New Deal under Franklin Roosevelt, the minimum wage, the Work Projects Administration and the Voting Rights Act, among other highlights) have given way to periods of conservative retrenchment.

In Lux’s view, “[i]t is a simple fact that since the Gilded Age ushered big money and Social Darwinist ethics into our governmental system, when conservatives have dominated our government, corruption has been at a peak.” The pattern is that conservatives believe in “more, rather than fewer, barriers to voting”; in “elites doing the business of government in secret” and “in direct partnership with wealthy businessmen.” Conservatives find it acceptable that “the rich get richer at the public’s expense” and form coalitions with right-wing Christians, anti-abortionists, family values groups, opponents of gay rights, the National Rifle Association and states’-rights Southerners.

Lux rightly condemns as “one of the most shameful symbolic political acts in modern American history” the signal Ronald Reagan sent to Southerners by kicking off his 1980 general election

campaign in the small town of Philadelphia, Mississippi, known primarily for the murders of three civil rights workers there during the summer of 1964. Reagan spoke no word about those dead brave men, but he did say, "I believe in states' rights."

"He was tapping out the code," Bob Herbert wrote in the Nov. 13, 2007, edition of *The New York Times*. "It was understood that when politicians started chirping about 'states' rights' to white people in places like Neshoba County they were saying that when it comes down to you and the blacks, we're with you."

Lux makes the strong case that after 28 years of conservative dominance, "the public is ready for a strong, confident progressive message," and the accuracy of that argument was seemingly confirmed on Nov. 5, 2008. But he also notes that Democrats continue to be overly preoccupied with "how we can inoculate ourselves against conservative attacks and how we can seem like centrists, rather than liberals." This defensive posture gives Republican candidates a chance to perpetuate the misleading myths that get them elected.

These myths are inseparable from Shenkman's ideas about our stupidity. Herbert wrote his piece in response to attempts to place Reagan's Mississippi appearance and his deplorable civil rights record "in a racially benign context." Along the same lines, Shenkman points out that on Election Day 2008, 7 percent of Florida voters professed to believe that Barack Obama is a Muslim. Another 40 percent claimed not to know his actual religion, which is Christianity.

Shenkman and Lux agree that from the 1950s onward, television has dumbbed down political debate and decision-making with its emphasis on shorter and shorter news spots and on appearance and manufactured personality—e.g., elitist George W. Bush as a brush-clearing rancher—over substance. Shenkman asks us to think about how Abraham Lincoln's gangly height (6 feet 3 inches), unkempt hair and high-pitched voice would have played in a televised debate against incumbent Sen. Stephen A. Douglas (5 feet 4 inches, with a paunch). In their historical debates, before television whittled American attention spans, one candidate

spoke for 60 minutes, the other followed for 90 minutes, then the first candidate delivered a 30-minute response.

Ironically, television arrived just as polling, primaries and referendums were giving increasing political power to "the people"—an abstraction that Shenkman finds "largely meaningless."

Shenkman's lack of confidence in "the people" as politically engaged and informed citizens—or even as people aware of the workings of government and their own basic rights—falls just short of the sort of ignorant masses critique one expects from conservative thinkers like the late William F. Buckley Jr. While Shenkman criticizes Buckley for writing that "the democracy of universal suffrage is not a bad form of government; it is simply not necessarily nor inevitably a good form of government," he knows Buckley is simply recognizing that unless progressives use effective countermeasures, stupid people will vote stupidly, prejudiced people will vote according to their prejudices and people with limited experience or niche concerns will vote according to their narrow interests.

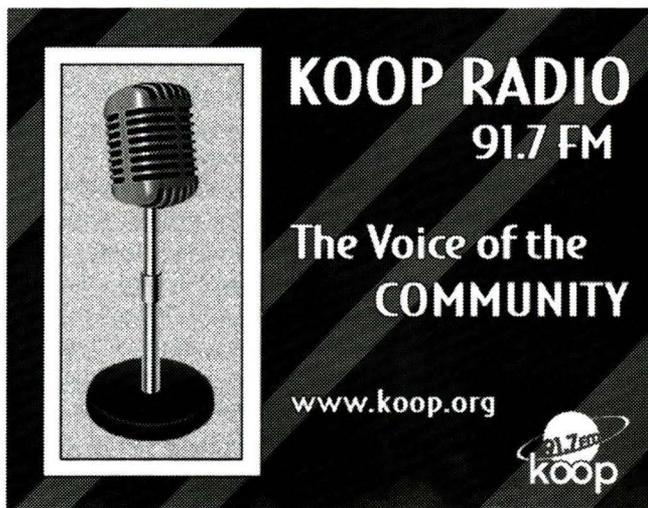
Lux never addresses this problem; he sees Thomas Jefferson's faith that "all men are created equal" with "unalienable rights" to "Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness" as the foundation of progressive politics and ideals. Lux hears those ideals re-enunciated in Lincoln's Gettysburg Address, Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech, and Obama's "hope" speech of Jan. 8, 2008.

Shenkman views a past when "the people" were told how to vote by labor organizations, political parties, church leaders or local newspaper endorsements as preferable to the present-day preponderance of detached and uninterested voters. Voters' ignorance, he writes, makes them easy targets for push polling, Fox News, Pat Robertson and Karl Rove.

Shenkman ends his book with a sobering epilogue on Obama's election: "From where I sit, the errors to which the public is prone—errors rooted in a profound indifference to the rational discussion of politics—remain every bit as alarming today as they were a year ago or five years ago."

In his final overview, Lux re-emphasizes the damage done to our national well-being during periods of conservative ascendancy, and the many problems we still face regarding racism, income disparity, health care and insurance, education, war and foreign relations, civil liberties and the economy. But he is encouraged by the promise of new ways of disseminating information, volunteering and donating, such as MoveOn.org and ActBlue. These help people become informed, meet their neighbors and allow them to give time and money in ways that compete with corporate contributions and privately amassed conservative war chests. The organization Invest in America's Future has proved that a full progressive program, properly thought out, worded and presented, can attract swing voters. "We can solve the immense problems of our time if we understand our history, throw fear and caution aside, and then choose the path that goes forward," Lux writes. That would be the progressive path. ■

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