

5-10-2019

The Life of Julia: A Failed Progressive Political Campaign

Caleb Jasso

Pepperdine University, School of Public Policy, caleb.jasso@pepperdine.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/ppr>

Recommended Citation

Jasso, Caleb (2019) "The Life of Julia: A Failed Progressive Political Campaign," *Pepperdine Policy Review*. Vol. 11, Article 1.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/ppr/vol11/iss1/1>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the School of Public Policy at Pepperdine Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Pepperdine Policy Review by an authorized editor of Pepperdine Digital Commons. For more information, please contact bailey.berry@pepperdine.edu.

The Life of Julia: A Failed Progressive Political Campaign

By: Caleb Jasso

Abstract

In his 2012 re-election campaign, President Barack Obama implemented what would become a highly controversial political ad called “The Life of Julia.” This ad followed the life of a fictional person named Julia – whose life was demonstrated to be better as a result of the welfare state programs of the Obama administration. Reaction to the campaign ad was so negative that it was quickly removed from President Obama’s official website, and to this day cannot be found there. Staunch resistance to the ad stemmed from the accusation that it glorified the idea of a welfare state and illustrated what a life without genuine purpose or meaning would look like. In Julia’s world, the state was all that mattered, and all of her life’s decisions were supposed to support the legacy and longevity of the state – at the expense of her natural, God-given liberties and her individuality.

Keywords

Welfare, Liberty, Self-Rule, Liberalism, Progressivism, Progressive, Morality, Individualism, Autonomy

While running for re-election in 2012, President Barack Obama launched a campaign ad in the form of a fictional children's book titled "The Life of Julia." This ad, which was quickly taken down from President Obama's official website, follows the life of the fictional character Julia from the age of 3 to the age of 67, and highlights just how much better her life would be under the progressive policies supported by President Obama than the policies of his Republican opponent, Mitt Romney. Although it was intended to demonstrate the superiority of progressive policies, it had the opposite effect and received much criticism from Republicans and Democrats alike. Many Americans who cherished self-reliance were concerned because, "buried within "The Life of Julia" is the ideological vision of modern liberalism -- to create a state that takes care of its people from cradle to grave"¹. Those who criticized the ad saw it as an attempt to romanticize both welfare and the surrendering of individuality, which is demonstrated through, "[Julia's] spare, faceless affect, [which] is meant to evoke a more modern, independent sensibility — with the exception of her life of endless government dependency."²

Modern liberalism and its progressive policies have evolved and changed significantly from the version of liberalism introduced by John Locke, which promoted the importance of tolerance, individualism, rationality, property as a natural right, and the duty of the government to protect the rights of the individual. Classical liberalism has always been centered on *liberty*, but over time, modern liberalism has become an ideology that contradicts itself. Although it technically promotes the same principles as it always has, specifically the importance of freedom and autonomy (demonstrated through Julia), the principles of modern liberalism, which heavily emphasize *personal* autonomy, can only be truly realized through the support and "selfless" effort of an expert-filled, omniscient government. As revealed by the relationship between Julia and the progressive state, modern liberalism seeks to establish an environment where individuals, in exchange for a degree of independence and self-

¹ <https://www.cnn.com/2012/05/09/opinion/bennett-obama-campaign/index.html>

² https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/obamas-julia-ad-and-the-new-hubby-state/2012/05/11/gIQAcRdoIU_story.html?utm_term=.69821d52b482

autonomy, can reach their full potential while pursuing whatever it is in which they desire to excel in. The progressive state does this while also providing them with a more fulfilling and consoling bond than a traditional relationship such as with a family or religion.

In Julia's world, the government provides the ideal environment that she needs in order to develop into the perfect autonomous individual. Here, Julia is freed from things considered old-fashioned societal constraints, like a traditional family, spouse, church, or local community – all of which now become secondary to the state, the entity with which she has her most meaningful interactions. Julia's life-long bond with the government perfectly expresses the relationship that a modern liberal government aims to have with the American people, which is, "that the state has the responsibility for creating institutions under which individuals can effectively realize the potentialities that are theirs,"³ and not be constrained by overt personal responsibilities and self-reliance. The stages of Julia's life demonstrate this seamlessly, as it is shown that without progressive programs, such as the monopoly of federal student loans, Julia could be oppressed by conservative traditions, ideas, and policies – thus never realizing her full potential. Furthermore, Julia exemplifies the core modern liberal principle of freedom through state-based liberation from traditional societal norms, as each stage of her life (represented by the different slides of the ad) explains how because of specific liberal initiatives, such as the Head Start and Race to the Top programs, enabled her to, "[achieve] a life of perfect autonomy, courtesy of a massive, sometimes intrusive, always solicitous, ever-present government."⁴

Although the majority of viewers found Julia's relationship with the modern liberal state concerning, there were still those who tried to stay objective and point out that the ad was meant to appeal to the modern middle-class woman, who perhaps did not want to get married and was more open to cutting ties with tradition. The slideshow can be perceived as highly appealing to women

³ John Dewey, *Liberalism and Social Action*, pg. 34-35.

⁴ Patrick J. Deneen, *Why Liberalism Failed*, pg. 57.

because it demonstrates that, with these progressive policies, they might be able to focus entirely on themselves and achieve their full potential – the touted goal of modern liberalism. Furthermore, by showing that Julia is, at least theoretically, in control of her life’s decisions because of state subsidization, the progressive’s goal, “to secure the real and not the nominal rule of the people,”⁵ is finally in reach of being realized.

An important element missing from Julia’s life is any form of community outside of her relationship with the state. She does volunteer at a community garden in her retirement, as indicated by the final part when she is 67, however as it is government-sponsored, it should not be counted as a non-state relationship. Of the various associations in her life, she seems to have little to no involvement with a family or, a religious institution. Although liberalism in America maintains strong roots to Christianity – which establishes a connection that does not rely on ethnicity, nationality, status, or family – it does not necessarily enthusiastically support religion. Modern liberalism identifies certain negative elements about faith-based organizations, because, “without complete certainty religion does not offer genuine consolation. It is without the strength to compensate our weakness. Nor can it sanction the rules of morality.”⁶ This type of uncertainty - the constant worrying of whether or not an individual is performing well enough or to their peak potential, both morally and economically – is exactly what modern liberalism in America seeks to rectify, and it is for this reason, that the liberal progressive state seeks to replace allegiance to religion with allegiance to the state. This allegiance becomes possible because, “in place of one church which is sovereign over all men, there are now many rival churches, rival states, voluntary associations, and detached individuals,”⁷ which fuels confusion, but, the “[state’s] hold on the people is enduring because [it] promises nothing which [it] cannot achieve; [it] proposes

⁵ Ronald J. Pestritto, *American Progressivism: A Reader*, pg. 36.

⁶ Walter Lippmann, *A Preface to Morals*, pg. 49.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pg. 82.

nothing which turns out to be a fake [;]"⁸ the modern liberal state provides purpose, closure, and guarantees eternal sovereignty.

Modern liberalism takes advantage of mankind's desire for community and security. Although liberalism is centered on liberty and emphasizes the freedom to *do*, its modern phase is the foundation for progressivism, which emphasizes the freedom *from*. In the case of Julia, liberalism in a progressive America means the freedom from worry and the freedom to realize ones full potential as a result of surrendering a certain level of independence to the state, so that an individual may escape alienation, loneliness, and worry. Progressive liberalism achieves this level of control in "The Life of Julia" by exploiting, "the natural liberty of man [, which is] to be free from any superior power on earth, and not to be under the will or legislative authority of man, but to have only the law of nature for his rule,"⁹ and as the law of nature, in a Darwinian sense, is the domination of the weak by the strong through the survival of the fittest, "contemporary liberalism will increasingly resort to imposing the liberal order by fiat – especially in the form of the administrative state run by a small minority who increasingly disdain democracy."¹⁰ In "The Life of Julia" the ultimate goal of the modern liberal state is to control the individual and mold them into the ideal progressive citizen – an individual who thinks they have achieved true self-autonomy, but who, in reality, has merely traded away their God-given liberty for the false independence and superficial freedom of choice that is provided by an entity that guarantees consolation, security, and equality.

⁸ Walter Lippmann, *A Preface to Morals*, pg. 282.

⁹ John Locke, *Second Treatise of Government*, pg. 3.

¹⁰ Patrick J. Deneen, *Why Liberalism Failed*, pg. 180.

Resources

Bennett, William J. "Obama's 'Life of Julia' Is the Wrong Vision for America." *CNN*. May 09, 2012.
<https://www.cnn.com/2012/05/09/opinion/bennett-obama-campaign/index.html>.

Deneen, Patrick J. *Why Liberalism Failed*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018.

Dewey, John. *Liberalism and Social Action*. Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2000.

Gavora, Jessica. "Obama's 'Julia' Ad and the New Hubby State." *The Washington Post*. May 11, 2012.
https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/obamas-julia-ad-and-the-new-hubby-state/2012/05/11/gIQAcRdoIU_story.html?noredirect=on&utm_term=.8730d1c0531b.

Lippmann, Walter. *A Preface to Morals*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1960.

Locke, John. *Second Treatise of Government*. 1689.

Pestritto, Ronald J., and William J. Atto. *American Progressivism: A Reader*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2008.