

Bill Bradley: Looking at America

"TIME PRESENT, TIME PAST"

By Bill Bradley
Alfred A. Knopf
442 pages

By STEVE CHARNOVITZ

"America's prosperity and its progress depend on a wise government." So explains Sen. Bill Bradley in his new book, "Time Present, Time Past." This one statement captures the essence of Sen. Bradley's views. Governments are created to solve social problems that would be uncorrectable without collective action.

The idea that prosperity and progress can be promoted by government is under assault today. Many people believe that the federal government impedes our prosperity and drags down our progress. Some Republicans, like Sen. Phil Gramm, were gleeful during the recent partial government shutdown. For years, conservative think tanks have been preparing blueprints to terminate, privatize or devolve federal programs to the states.

Sen. Bradley admits to the deficiencies of government. Indeed, he faults his Democratic Party for a loss of vision during the 1980s. He approaches his subject from the point of view of a reformer. In an engagingly written memoir of his years in Washington, Sen. Bradley shows how the political process can produce constructive change when people work hard enough for it. Through a skillful use of historical vignettes and portraits of extraordinary Americans whom he has met during his years on the road, Sen. Bradley deepens the reader's understanding of the commonwealth.

"The times call for radical reform," Sen. Bradley declares, "in our economy, our politics, and our social

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interactions." His prescriptions can be divided into two parts — improving government and improving society. He has good ideas for each.

Sen. Bradley likes to fix programs rather than to create new ones. His book devotes dozens of pages to what may be the most mixed-up federal programs — our water, timber, grazing and mining subsidies. He shows how these subsidies misuse economic resources, redistribute income perversely and sully the environment. He is correct to perceive the management of publicly created "property rights" as a critical problem. Although there was little direct benefit to his New Jersey constituents, Sen. Bradley took up this issue and attained some progress with the passage of a new federal water law in 1992.

Throughout his public career, Sen. Bradley has held enlightened views about international trade. He was an early, strong supporter of the North American Free Trade Agreement, and believes the trade pact helped Mexico from lurching back to a "protectionist, state-dominated economic approach." He also sees an important geo-cultural benefit to Nafta in regularizing contacts between Mexicans and Americans. This interaction will enrich both countries and promote a "New Worlder" society.

Another economic issue that receives attention in the book is employment policy.

"The flip-side of burgeoning productivity is significant job disruption," Sen. Bradley warns. He is concerned about wage stagnation and continuing layoffs. He gives an example of the Hercules Corp. research center near Wilmington, Del., where employees forego car pools

on Mondays; that's when layoffs are usually announced, and the dismissed workers sent home at noon.

The senator does not present a comprehensive remedy to these problems. But he makes a few proposals, such as a requirement that companies report on broader issues than just financial results.

Sen. Bradley views the 1986 tax act as his most significant achievement. He reiterates his philosophy of low tax rates and few loopholes. Surprisingly, he has little to say about the current tax debate. Are current tax rates low enough? Should Congress close loopholes, losing billions of dollars of revenue? Should the income tax be scrapped? His book contains only a vague suggestion that we shift part of the tax burden to "unnecessary consumption."

From firsthand experience, the senator urges an overhaul of campaign fund-raising laws. Unlike many of his colleagues, who are willing simply to dribble along with minor tinkering, Sen. Bradley recognizes the need for fundamental change. He favors a constitutional amendment to limit the ability of rich contributors and PACs to influence elections.

Some of the most eloquent parts of the book involve Sen. Bradley's views about society. After reviewing the history of U.S. policy toward Indians and immigrants, he shows our continuing legacy of intolerance on matters of race and origin. Unlike many politicians, he believes that "New Americans can add energy, dynamism and hope." He preaches a "multiracial society," where we will look beyond color to the uniqueness of each person.

Sen. Bradley is deeply troubled

about the cleavages between blacks and whites, and between rich and poor. "We are allowing a violent Third World country to emerge in our midst," he laments, "and we are doing little to avert it." This reviewer wishes the senator had focused a bit more on solutions. He favors "merit-based" affirmative action, which is his way of sidestepping that nettlesome issue.

Another social dysfunction is the decline in worker and employer standards. "Telephone operators cut you off; clerks act as if they're doing you a favor to take your money for a purchase." Unions have lost membership. He advances some fruitful ideas, such as more worker participation and profit sharing.

Finally, Sen. Bradley rightly points to the media as a social problem. He deplores the triviality of many political stories and yearns for more "shoe-leather reportage." He says reporters are "not entitled to an answer to every personal question about you and your family." After 442 pages, the reader learns little about Bill Bradley's family.

Sen. Bradley has written an important and interesting book. Occasionally, it is a bit leaden. For example, he confides that "I always liked macroeconomics more than the economics of the firm." Yet the autobiography portrays an intelligent, self-confident leader.

If Sen. Bradley runs for the presidency in 2000, he will be a formidable contender. He relates well to the middle class. He has a huge network of friends. He seems virtuous.

Sen. Bradley's timing has always been superb. He will remain interesting to watch.

Steve Charnovitz writes often on business, economics and the environment.