

William Voegeli --The American Welfare State
interview on February 9, 2011
This is an unedited transcript of the interview

Peter Robinson: For Uncommon Knowledge, I am Peter Robinson. By the way, be sure to join us on Facebook at www.facebook.com/UncKnowledge – www.facebook.com/UncKnowledge. A visiting scholar at the Henry Salvatori Center at Claremont McKenna College, William Voegeli is a Contributing Editor to the *Claremont Review of Books*; his own new book Never Enough: America's Limitless Welfare State. Bill Voegeli, welcome.

William Voegeli: Thank you, good to be here.

Peter Robinson: Let me begin by quoting to you from Never Enough. “There is no prospect that America’s welfare state will either, will become either a multiple or a fraction of what it is now.” Why not?

William Voegeli: Yes. There's a saying in politics that you either have big fights or you have nasty fights. I think in America we're not really having a big fight over the welfare state because most conservatives don't say it but realize that its not going to disappear. Most liberals don't say but realize it's not going to become like the Swedish social safety net, so the goal posts are fairly close together. But we have, what we wind up with is a kind of narcissism of small differences. The relatively small amount of terrain between the absolute conservative and the absolute liberal position is fought over tenaciously.

Peter Robinson: All right. Segment One – By the Numbers. How big was the welfare state before Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal, in easy to grasp for the layman terms, and how big is it today?

William Voegeli: It was, America’s welfare state was negligible prior to 1933, and it was not really that big even at the start of World War II. The good data coming from the Office of Management and Budget's historical tables unfortunately begins in 1940. And the press of financing first World War II and then the Korean War were such that it was not until 1954 that per capita constant dollar expenditures on human resources, this is the OMB's term, which means roughly what we mean by the welfare state, was not until 1954 that they equaled the level they had been at in 1940. So you can really sort of start talking about the welfare state in the mid '50s. And you ask how big is it today? Well according to the Historical Tables going up through 2009, constant dollar per capita expenditures by the federal government on these five big areas: Social Security; all other federal programs for income support; Medicare; all other federal programs for health such as Medicaid, Health Sciences and all federal programs for education – job training and social services. Those were 18.6 times as big in 2009 as they had been in 1954. So it's doubling every – I think 18 years or so, something like that.

Peter Robinson: All right. Bill, draw a distinction, you already started to do so, but draw a distinction in terms of size, magnitude between the New Deal, Franklin Roosevelt, and about three decades later, Lyndon Johnson’s Great Society.

William Voegeli: The New Deal laid down markers, established political precedents, but I don’t think it spent a great deal of money compared to the American experience prior to FDR’s election in 1932 compared to our baseline understanding of what the government does today. The New Deal operationally looks fairly modest. But the foundations for the building were laid – the

William Voegeli --The American Welfare State
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Social Security Act of 1935 established the basis for really the welfare state that has been built up since. Even Medicare is not legally a separate title, a separate piece of legislation, but an amendment to the 1935 Social Security Act. So, the—

Peter Robinson: So, what happens with the Great Society?

William Voegeli: The Great Society is when, is really from Johnson winning his election in '64 until about the mid '70s, strangely enough until Carter takes over, that there is this big surge of federal spending. Both under Johnson and then under Nixon and Ford per capita cost dollar wealth, federal spending on human resources grows annually around 10% a year give or take.

Peter Robinson: Staggering.

William Voegeli: Yeah, and then partly because of political circumstances you have Prop 13 and the Tax Revolt in 1978.

Peter Robinson: In California the proposition which limited property taxes here in California and led to a wider tax revolt in the country.

William Voegeli: That's right. So you have, to borrow Peter Orzeg's phrase, the growth curve bends a lot then. The welfare state grows. It continues to grow after this mid-60s to mid-70s surge, but at a much slower rate. Even under Jimmy Carter the growth rate is more like two or three percent a year.

Peter Robinson: All right.

William Voegeli: Much lower under Reagan.

Peter Robinson: What happens to defense spending as the welfare state grows?

William Voegeli: It shrinks.

Peter Robinson: It shrinks in real terms or relative terms?

William Voegeli: It shrinks in relative terms.

Peter Robinson: So to wrap up your description of the growth of the welfare state, simply describing it, not the rights or the wrongs, but to describe it, it is accurate to say that there are still old people alive in this country who were born into a nation in which the welfare state simply did not exist. There are a lot of people, middle-aged in this country, who were born into a nation in which welfare spending was relatively modest and the principal spending effort by the federal government was defense. And then there are lots and lots and lots of people in their thirties or younger who, excuse me I don't mean to say thirty, but middle-aged people who have experienced this enormous expansion in spending who have experienced the growth of the welfare state to be triple that of defense spending. But I would almost suggest that it has happened so quickly that most Americans are only very dimly aware of it.

William Voegeli --The American Welfare State
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William Voegeli: Yes, 2011, anyone under 45 years of age today, anyone born since 1965 has no real recollection of a country organized differently than the one we live in now.

Peter Robinson: Segment two – What the Liberals Have Wrought, from Never Enough “progressives and New Dealers supplanted a government kept on a short leash to protect liberty with a government able to lay claim to all the powers it needs to promote welfare.” What you're getting at here, we just got at the growth of the welfare state, what you are getting at here is the intellectual groundwork that got laid during the period of the New Deal. Explain how that happened. Right up until the New Deal, it is understood in the courts, in the academy, elsewhere that the federal government is to be tightly limited and then something happens.

William Voegeli: Yes, well the Depression happens of course which creates a political opening that had not been there before. That is sort of the ground level of actual political events.

Peter Robinson: Right.

William Voegeli: Up in the air, at the level of political ideas, the progressive revolution of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century had really set itself against the American founding, against the idea of limited constitutional government and said that, this was for instance Woodrow Wilson's position, we need a government that instead of being closed in by checks and balances and the separation of powers, we need a government that is energetic, that has the power needs that can do all the things a nation much different from the one that Madison wrote the Constitution in and the agricultural nation with a ribbon of people along the Atlantic seaboard in the late eighteenth century.

Peter Robinson: We're a big, powerful, vigorous, industrial nation and we need a big powerful, vigorous federal government.

William Voegeli: John Rockefeller's America is very different from Thomas Jefferson's, this was the theory. A number of things, a number of steps towards the world we live in now were made during those years, but there was a curtailing factor which was that Americans remained dubious about this idea of pushing back against the American founding. They still liked the notion of a limited state of Jeffersonianism of government that was under our control. I think a very astute thing that Franklin Roosevelt did was to reformulate the progressive endeavor in Jeffersonian terms. Instead of saying that we are getting away from Madison's constitution he constantly framed the New Deal project as an endeavor to update the concept of inalienable rights to the circumstances of the twentieth century. So there were going to be rights to certain social welfare benefits and the government's job was to guarantee and secure those rights.

Peter Robinson: The right to a job; the right to health care and so forth.

William Voegeli: Decent health care, good schooling.

Peter Robinson: All right.

William Voegeli: Decent housing.

William Voegeli --The American Welfare State
interview on February 9, 2011

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Peter Robinson: So we get the intellectual foundations laid first by the Progressives then adapted by that crafty politician Franklin Roosevelt.

William Voegeli: The virtuoso.

Peter Robinson: The virtuoso, exactly and now let me quote you, which brings us to the intellectual state of affairs today and I will quote you once again from Never Enough. And this I think is one of the most arresting quotations in the entire book “What would be the size and nature of a welfare state that was not contemptibly austere. That did not urgently need a larger budget and a broader agenda.” In other words if you could give the liberals everything they wanted what would the welfare state look like? And to continue the quotation; “The answer to this question is – well that there is no answer to this question,” explain that, Bill.

William Voegeli: I started working on the book with what the lawyers call a ‘good faith effort’ to.

Peter Robinson: Silly you.

William Voegeli: Well.

Peter Robinson: Go ahead.

William Voegeli: The premise was this: for 75 years, since the start of the New Deal at least, American liberals have been saying that the welfare state we actually have is woefully and criminally insufficient. That it does not spend what it needs, have the resources, or do what a just, decent nation ought to. So my premise was that if there are these constant complaints about the welfare state’s insufficiency, there must be, if you sort of follow the arc of that logic, a perfectly sufficient welfare state out there, a kind of a platonic ideal.

Peter Robinson: Right.

William Voegeli: That as you were just saying, has the money it needs. The program does what it needs and doesn't need one more thing to be better. So the point was, well what is that? What is that welfare state look like? And the conclusion was that that city and speech really does not exist. There is no operative ideal for what a final, complete, and perfectly sufficient welfare state ought to be. This I think is the most interesting and troubling feature I would say about the liberal, intellectual, and political project.

Peter Robinson: So let me ask you if this is a fair summary of the liberal welfare state project of the last eight decades. They overturned a well articulated, I would say beautifully articulated, founding ideal of limited government which finds its highest expression in the Constitution of the United States, but what you could see in the early colonial constitutions and early state constitutions, deeply ingrained in the American political thought and habit. They overturned this well articulated ideal of limited government in favor of a new ideal, the welfare state which is, when it comes right down to it, fundamentally incoherent.

William Voegeli: I can't disagree. Yes, I think–

William Voegeli --The American Welfare State
interview on February 9, 2011
This is an unedited transcript of the interview

Peter Robinson: Make the best argument for them that you can.

William Voegeli: Yeah. Well.

Peter Robinson: I put it that way.

William Voegeli: Yes, I mean, all right, Devil's advocate, I would I think the best argument is that the Depression was the most vivid example of American capitalism not being a benign and secure and reassuring system. It needed adjustment. And that the liberal project, though never quite clear as to what it was ultimately aiming for, understood that it wanted to modify, soften, civilize, stabilize American capitalism. And I think if you could bring in the editorial staff of *The New Republic* for example, they would say you know if you look at the whole track record over the past 78 years since FDR was elected, the liberal project has not gotten off perfectly but Americans have certain securities from unemployment; from poverty that they lacked before; that the incursions on civil liberties and the rights of people have not been zero, but they haven't been terrible either. And most people think the tradeoff has been worth it. I think this would be sort of the liberal argument.

Peter Robinson: Segment three – Picking up the Tab Never Enough. “The programs, yes need to be paid for but very, very rich people and giant corporations will pick up the tab. And by blackening the skies with crisscrossing dollars, the welfare state manages people's perceptions of its costs and benefits to encourage them to believe an impossibility– that every household can be a net importer of wealth.” Explain that.

William Voegeli: Yeah I would be a bigger fan of liberalism if they would be more honest on this point. If they would say "look the programs we want to carry out here to help the poor, the suffering, the people who are sick, these are expensive undertakings. Living in a society that has these kinds of protections will make all of us better off. Those of us who find ourselves needing to avail ourselves of one or more of these programs clearly will be better off. But the rest of us will have the sense of security and social solidarity and psychic satisfaction of living in a society that takes care of its vulnerable better." Therefore, my sort of–

Peter Robinson: The ideal liberal.

William Voegeli: The ideal liberal says "therefore we should all pitch in and help and we do not have to turn the IRS into our favorite government agency, but we should understand that these are the burdens we pay in order to make our society a better place to live." If I heard that, I would have hard questions about what the limits of the enterprise would be, how it would be funded, how it would work, but I would have a great deal of respect for the people who put that argument forward.

Peter Robinson: The fundamental honesty there.

William Voegeli: That is right.

Peter Robinson: Okay. Let me quote again from Never Enough. “Confining tax increases to the most prosperous two percent of the population in order to award valuable prizes to the other

William Voegeli --The American Welfare State
interview on February 9, 2011

This is an unedited transcript of the interview

98% will result in making 49 people happy for every one you make angry which seems like a good formula for winning an election.”

William Voegeli: Yes, the gap between this ideal liberal and the actual was shown in the 2008 campaign when both Hilary Clinton and Barack Obama competing for the Democratic nomination and then later the general election promised repeatedly and categorically that if elected, no federal tax on any family making less than \$250,000 a year or any individual making less than \$200,000 a year would increase. Not income taxes, not any other.

Peter Robinson: Not nothing.

William Voegeli: Not nothing. Well, you do that, you come into office as Barack Obama did saying there's this long list of wonderful things we want the government to do, and all of the money increments are going to come about by raising taxes on the two or three percent of the population making more than \$250,000 a year. I do not think it works numerically, I just do not think there is enough money in—

Peter Robinson: Right.

William Voegeli: Those precincts for that to work out, but even if it did, I don't think it works sort of philosophically. You read the, you know the liberal blogger, Matthew Iglesias? You read him?

Peter Robinson: Yeah.

William Voegeli: Well he had a very interesting reaction to this \$250,000 limit offered by Obama which was, the bad thing with that proposal from the liberal point of view is that it concedes the core conservative argument which is that the welfare state is not worth having. It is worth having only if somebody else pays for it.

Peter Robinson: Bill, here's my, here is what I am probing for I guess. That the welfare state is almost necessarily, I have not thought it through maybe it is necessarily but for sure almost necessarily insidious. And here's why - because it creates almost irresistible incentives for the government and those who support the expansion of the welfare state to be fundamentally dishonest with the American people. So Franklin Roosevelt, what did you call him, the virtuoso, the political virtuoso says hah, here is how we will handle Social Security, we will not just make it a program for poor people, we will make it a program for everybody, making everybody feel caught, bought in so to speak.

William Voegeli: Sure.

Peter Robinson: And we will create the impression that you are putting money away for your own retirement. Fundamentally untrue, that is just not the way the system works and yet that is what most Americans appear to have believed for most of the period that program has been in existence, item one. Item two: it creates incentives for politicians to buy voters off. Not to represent them fairly but to set, to engage in a kind of class warfare trying to force costs out of their district and bring benefits into their district trying to force costs off the great mass of voters and onto the small

William Voegeli --The American Welfare State
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number of wealthier voters and to be fundamentally dishonest about it. Just as you said, blackening the skies with crisscrossing dollars, the welfare state manages, manages people's perceptions. The government of the United States ought not to be in the position of managing citizens perceptions. It is outrageous from the get go.

William Voegeli: That phrase – blackening the skies – comes from William Buckley's book Up from Liberalism.

Peter Robinson: Ah.

William Voegeli: It is 50 years old and it was sort of a throwaway line of his. He could do these sorts of things.

Peter Robinson: Bill had enough to throw away.

William Voegeli: Yeah, that is right. I had to bear down on it, but I think it really does get at something that's essential to the American welfare state and liberal project which is that there is, as you say. a concerted effort to make people believe that everybody can come out ahead if a finite number of dollars is rearranged kind of furiously.

Peter Robinson: It's nonsense.

William Voegeli: Yeah.

Peter Robinson: Final quotation in this segment, Segment Three here, when we are talking about the costs Never Enough "The only remaining constraint on the growth of the welfare state is the problem of paying for it." So as a matter of political fact, you think we are stuck with it and the welfare state will grow whenever the economy grows. Whenever there is more money it will get spent on the welfare state.

William Voegeli: This has been the pattern not only in the U.S. but in European social welfare states too. The slice of the pie allocated to the welfare state grows even as the pie itself gets bigger. So it's growing sort of doubly, it's a larger percentage of a larger total economy. The world has never really seen a shrinking welfare state.

Peter Robinson: Segment Four – The Conservative Failure. Never Enough, this is the saddest line in Never Enough, "Adjusted for inflation per capita federal welfare state spending," I can hardly believe this, "was 77% higher in 2007 than it was when President Reagan took office." How can that be? The Reagan Revolution takes place some years later you get the Gingrich Revolution taking place. George H.W. Bush succeeds Ronald Reagan. George W. Bush is in office for eight years. A lot of conservatives have a lot of prominence in American politics throughout this period and yet per capita federal welfare state spending goes up 77%.

William Voegeli: That's right. To put it another way, this is a period in American history where Republicans were always in control of something unlike the New Deal, unlike the first two years of the Obama Administration. Either the White House or they had a base in Capitol Hill. Well, a lot of these programs are on autopilot. Social Security–Congress didn't need to do anything for those to

William Voegeli --The American Welfare State
interview on February 9, 2011

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grow. Medicare, just sort of leave them be. And other programs. I was on a panel recently with Robert Rector of the Heritage Foundation who is looking at, he has a careful report of 71 means-tested federal welfare programs.

Peter Robinson: Means tested means you only get the benefit if you're poor.

William Voegeli: That is right.

Peter Robinson: If you need it.

William Voegeli: That is right.

Peter Robinson: By somebody's standard you need it.

William Voegeli: These are not the middle class entitlements.

Peter Robinson: As opposed to Social Security which you get, millionaires get Social Security.

William Voegeli: Warren Buffet gets a Social Security check, that is right. And he [Robert Rector] said, he had a chart showing the growth of these and it just shoots up like this, there is this little, this brief plateau that lasts, looks like about 45 minutes when Reagan is first in office and then it takes right off again. So even, so this, there is a huge dynamic at work here and I think conservatives in 1980 and again in 1994, really underestimated how formidable this was going to be – to stop or reverse.

Peter Robinson: Okay. Never Enough again, “The growth of the welfare state is the result of two trends: economic growth and the political willingness to devote an increasing portion of the economic output to social welfare programs.” You made this point earlier.

William Voegeli: Yeah.

Peter Robinson: “During the two decades following Reagan's 1980 election, economic growth accounted for almost all the increase in welfare state spending. The portion of GDP devoted to federal welfare outlays barely budge.” So we can at least say that Ronald Reagan capped the political willingness to devote more and more of the pie to welfare spending. As the pie got bigger, fine, welfare spending got bigger, but he at least limited that. That's an achievement.

William Voegeli: That is an achievement. On this question of economic growth which both parties are for, conservatives think they do better than liberals. To change the metaphor a bit from slices of pies, the consumer dilemma is that you are sort of, you are trying, you are on an escalator and it's going up and you're trying to walk down. The economy is getting bigger even if you do these exertions to constrain the relative size of the welfare state it is getting bigger just by virtue of economic expansion.

Peter Robinson: What happened during Newt Gingrich and then what happened under George W. Bush?

William Voegeli --The American Welfare State
interview on February 9, 2011
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William Voegeli: The—

Peter Robinson: When I say during Newt Gingrich, Newt Gingrich is Speaker from '95, actually takes office in 95, is Speaker for four years.

William Voegeli: Four years.

Peter Robinson: Four years, so the second half of the 1990s.

William Voegeli: Right. The President under whom welfare state spending grew mostly was Ronald Reagan; second is Bill Clinton. So Gingrich's efforts were not in vain. This clearly has something to do with that. But there were also.

Peter Robinson: Gridlock works.

William Voegeli: Gridlock helped. There were also some demographic factors slowing down the growth of the welfare state in the 1990s. The people signing up for Social Security and Medicare when Bill Clinton was President were – that was the age cohort born during the Great Depression, a very small group of Americans, so just the demographic bulge was negligible during those years.

Peter Robinson: Conservatives got demographically lucky for a while.

William Voegeli: Yeah. Our luck has run out.

Peter Robinson: And George W. Bush is President; Tom Delay is the moving force among Republicans in the House of Representatives, Speaker Dennis Hastert a Republican, what happens then?

William Voegeli: Yes, well I think Republicans were burned so badly by the government shutdown in late 1995 and early 1996 that they never wanted to get near that again. So you had probably the most demoralizing thing conservatives ever heard from a Republican politician was when Tom Delay towards, I think this was about midway through Bush's presidency, said "you know there is really not much left to cut in the federal budget. The reason we're not cutting back more is that we've been at it a while and all of the fat is pretty much excised."

Peter Robinson: So conservatives, welfare state has been with us for seven and a half decades. Conservatives have been against it with varying degrees of intensity for seven and a half decades. They have succeeded by some measures in retarding the growth of the welfare state. But never, not once, not for a single year in shrinking it. "Liberal victories advance liberalism; conservative victories postpone liberalism." Why, why, why?

William Voegeli: Well, my esoteric explanation for this phenomenon is that people like getting things. And the party that presents itself as the party of giving things to people has a significant built in advantage.

William Voegeli --The American Welfare State
interview on February 9, 2011

This is an unedited transcript of the interview

Peter Robinson: So, the electorate has been corrupted, the Republic of virtue, Washington talks about the importance of virtue among the citizenry. All the Founding Fathers did. And now Americans are on the take.

William Voegeli: That's maybe not the-- not words I would necessarily choose, but also not ones that I could disagree with. I think that you talk about sort of the marketing of the New Deal and Social Security, talking about the efforts to reassure people that the money they would be getting was their money, money they had put in. This was not only to serve the purpose of building an appetite for ever larger Social Security payments and benefits, but it was also to reassure people on just exactly that point. If you're getting a Social Security check, no you're not on the dole, you're not a loafer, you're not taking advantage of your fellow citizens. This is your money that you're getting back. So there are great exertions to reassure people at that point in American history when they were still very dubious about the propriety of the welfare state.

Peter Robinson: To reassure them by misleading them.

William Voegeli: Well this was a legitimate undertaking, yes.

Peter Robinson: All right. Segment Five – What is to be done? Never Enough, “Conservatives need to take the position that America is going to have a welfare state, should have a welfare state and that if not part of the conservative project to bring about the disappearance of the welfare state even in the distant future.” Bill, I want to be your friend. I really do. You have to explain that to me.

William Voegeli: Well, our mutual friend Ramesh Ponnuru wrote basically a very nice review of Never Enough for *National Review*.

Peter Robinson: That makes two of you. Go ahead.

William Voegeli: But he said--he sort of pushed back on this point as well. He said "Voegeli was" I do not remember it exactly but somewhere along the lines of "Voegeli is oddly emphatic when he insists that the conservatives need to sort of reconcile themselves to the existence and sort of perpetuity of the welfare state." Well, you know I think that this might strike you as a strange analogy, but how these questions get framed is very important in politics. And the analogy I have in mind is the tensions between the Israelis and the Palestinians. If two adjacent people have, as countries have been having for thousands of years, is sort of boundary disputes, well you can have a kind of a normal discussion once fighting does not really seem like it is going to settle things anymore. I would say all right, we will draw the line here rather than here and you can split the difference and work these things out. If, however, the main reason Israel is deeply reluctant about these kinds of concessions is that it is those land for peace swaps become very dubious if there is never going to be any peace. If you are dealing with people who want to abolish the entity you are defending.

Peter Robinson: So you are saying that even if the Palestinians must grant formally and forever the legitimacy of the Israelis, of the state of Israel, conservatives need to grant the legitimacy of the welfare state. Get over it.

William Voegeli --The American Welfare State
interview on February 9, 2011

This is an unedited transcript of the interview

William Voegeli: Short answer, yes.

Peter Robinson: All right.

William Voegeli: Get over it and also I mean I–

Peter Robinson: Okay so fine, I understand that as a matter of if this thing has been with us for 75 years it is not going away tomorrow and no conservative is going away tomorrow and no conservative is going to be able to win elections without dealing with that large, or at least not be able to govern without dealing with that fact, got it. I am with you there and I understand that completely. I am with you everywhere, you are such a charmer and you have so many facts at your disposal. But the argument that I want–

William Voegeli: I hear a tough question.

Peter Robinson: Well, no I just repeat to you, it's one thing to say Americans need to; conservatives need to take the position that America is going to have a welfare state, got it, understood. Should have a welfare state is a different argument.

William Voegeli: I think that there is a lot of work to be done. While those progressives were writing their books back a hundred years ago, attacking the founding, there was sort of a counter progressive movement that I think needs to be explored. I think people like Charles Evans Hughes who was Chief Justice of the Supreme Court twice, Calvin Coolidge, William Howard Taft the only person to be both President and Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, Elihu Root an important figure no longer very famous. And what it seems to me these gentlemen were doing was trying to fashion a way for government to have the energy it needed to cope with what were indeed important economic and social transformations. America really was in many ways a very different place in 1920 than it was in 1787.

Peter Robinson: Well, I don't know anything about Root and I don't know much about Charles Evans Hughes, but certainly Coolidge and Taft were imbued with the ethic of the Founders.

William Voegeli: That's right.

Peter Robinson: Limited government; civic virtue; a republic of virtue. So how did they–

William Voegeli: But at the same time as I understand it and am working into this, at the same time, not–

Peter Robinson: I think you're under contract for the next book because this sounds fascinating.

William Voegeli: Well I think conservatives need to– among the things we need to conserve is this sort of effort to adapt the Constitutional framework to the requirements of a modern industrial or now what they are calling the post-industrial society. The Jeffersonian agrarianism provides just a finite inventory of answers to these problems.

William Voegeli --The American Welfare State
interview on February 9, 2011

This is an unedited transcript of the interview

Peter Robinson: Right.

William Voegeli: And my impression is that these critics of Progressivism were wrestling with the question – how do we fashion a state that is in simultaneous conformity with the Founding principles and with the modern exigencies. It is going to be different; it cannot simply mean that any government endeavor that Thomas Jefferson would not have recognized is therefore illegitimate.

Peter Robinson: Final couple of questions here. A couple of weeks ago we had President Obama's State of the Union Address, followed by Congressman Paul Ryan's response. Let me just read you a passage from each.

William Voegeli: Okay.

Peter Robinson: And ask you to comment.

William Voegeli: Okay.

Peter Robinson: Open ended, you comment in any way you like, but fairly briefly alas because of time constraints here.

William Voegeli: Understood.

Peter Robinson: President Obama "I will not hesitate to create or enforce common sense safeguards to protect the American people. That's what we've done in this country for more than a century, that's why we passed reform that finally prevents the health insurance industry from exploiting patients." Health reform to protect Americans, common sense safeguards, what do you make of all that?

William Voegeli: Well I think that–

Peter Robinson: The moment has passed? Sounds a little old fashioned?

William Voegeli: No, I think that the contradictions of our healthcare system were not resolved but in a way accentuated by the Healthcare Reform Act passed in 2010. And so I think that our healthcare system is still a house divided against itself that cannot stand. It's partly centralized command and control; partly market based.

Peter Robinson: He's creating a crisis not ending one.

William Voegeli: I think he's – every question that's been put off has been put off in a way that it is hoped will make Medicare for all or a public option the inevitable response 5, 10, or 15 years from now.

Peter Robinson: Congressman Ryan. "Their actions, the Democrats, show they want a federal government that controls too much and spends too much. This is a future in which we will transform our social safety net into a hammock which lulls able-bodied people into lives of

William Voegeli --The American Welfare State
interview on February 9, 2011

This is an unedited transcript of the interview

complacency and dependency. We need to reclaim our American system of limited government which has blessed us with unprecedented prosperity and has done more to help the poor than any other economic system ever designed.” He's driving Republicans right over the cliff. Is that right?

William Voegeli: No.

Peter Robinson: He's resisting the welfare state to which Americans have grown accustomed? No?

William Voegeli: That's not how I hear it.

Peter Robinson: Good, all right, let's hear what you think.

William Voegeli: I hear that Congressman Ryan would agree with the point I have been making that we need, there is no prospect we are going to eliminate the welfare state. We need a welfare state we can live with, one even that we can admire.

Peter Robinson: A social safety net.

William Voegeli: A social safety net, one that helps people who genuinely need it and gets out of the way of letting people help themselves in other circumstances. There are going to be people who are, there is a small number of people who are chronically in bad shape in terms of their life situations; there's a larger number who are transitionally. A decent society will find a way to help them and some of the ways will involve government programs. But not limitless.

Peter Robinson: All right. William Voegeli, author of Never Enough: America's Limitless Welfare State. Thank you.

William Voegeli: Thank you, Peter.

Peter Robinson: I'm Peter Robinson for Uncommon Knowledge, thanks for joining us.