



The National Civic Federation and the Making of a New Liberalism, 1900-1915

Christophe J. Cyphers

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Founded in 1900, the National Civic Federation (NCF), a broad-based, nongovernmental social and policy reform organization, emerged throughout the Progressive Era as one of the nation's most powerful policy research and lobbying groups. Amidst the strong demand by rank-and-file Americans for economic and social reform, the NCF proposed that the government begin to assume a more prominent role in managing the nation's economy and providing for the needs of the country's weakest and most vulnerable citizens. The organization constructed broad-based coalitions of business leaders, labor leaders, social scientists, and politicians with diverse backgrounds to fashion model legislation and promote public policy aimed at meeting the demands created by modern capitalism.

Cyphers' work challenges the longstanding assumption that organizations like the NCF existed simply to build a relationship between big business and the government for the sole benefit of big business. He argues that the NCF sought the preservation of the fundamental tenets of American liberalism and the redefinition of this liberalism for a modern polity whose life was shaped by industrial and commercial capitalism. It saw the individual states, rather than the federal government, as the ideal mechanism to promote uniform economic and social reform. Cyphers also charts the origins of civic cooperation and the creation of voluntary associations as alternatives to the statist remedies to modern economic and social problems that were championed by America's early 20th-century socialist movement.

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