



Most See Government as Threat to Rights

Ronald Reagan once said that the nine scariest words in the English language are “I’m from the government, and I’m here to help.” In thus opining, he was simply reflecting an American tradition that began with the Founding Fathers: a healthy suspicion of government.

And, now, despite rampant government dependency, it seems that this tradition lives on. A CNN/Opinion Research Corporation survey shows that 56 percent of Americans consider the federal government an “immediate” threat to their rights. Not surprisingly, however, where citizens come down on the question is influenced by political affiliation. [Writes](#) CNN’s Paul Steinhauser, “only 37 percent of Democrats, 63 percent of Independents and nearly 7 in 10 Republicans say the federal government poses a threat to the rights of Americans.”

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To put the poll in perspective, there are a few things we should note. Since CNN is a liberal news organization, there is every reason to believe that 56 percent may be a low-end number on American suspicion of Uncle Sam. It’s also notable that the percentages of Independents and Republicans who consider government a threat are extremely close, while the former are separated from the Democrats by a whopping 26 points. This indicates that Democrats are out of step with the mainstream on this issue. Moreover, since elections are swung by Independents, the fact that they side with Republicans bodes well for the party this November. After all, the GOP is currently perceived as the best bet for putting a brake on the socialist tide sweeping Washington.

Yet we should also take note of the word “immediate.” Whatever was meant by it exactly in the poll, such research is, to an extent, just a snapshot of the mood at the moment. This is especially true among Independents, called “swing” voters because, highly influenced by emotional factors, they’re the pendulum of American politics.

The problem here is that while the socialist proposals currently emanating from Congress are raising hackles, the federal government has long been exceeding the bounds established for it by the Constitution. And if we’re really serious about protecting our rights, the only solution is to understand our founding document and support only those politicians who will adhere to it. Unfortunately, as a recent [study](#) has shown, many Americans not only don’t understand the Constitution, they believe it’s “obsolete.”

Yet, there is a problem with understanding the Constitution: Many don’t want to. They would rather just dismiss it as obsolete because it forestalls the kind of government action that could create, by their lights, a better world. This is the statist mentality quite common today. But is the government, as a student once said to me,

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“there to make people happy”? Or is there good reason to be suspicious of it?

Unless we’re anarchists, we realize that government is a necessary evil. But big government is an even greater unnecessary evil. Note that, generally speaking, the most infamous crimes throughout history — the Holocaust, the communist extermination of 100 million people during the 20th century, etc. — have been perpetrated by large, intrusive governments. So while some say it takes a big government to solve big problems, I say it takes a big government to commit big crimes.

In fact, big crimes are almost inevitable when a state achieves absolute power, which, as Lord Acton said, “corrupts absolutely.” This is why man has sometimes sought to establish a balance of power in a nation. As an example, the ancient Spartans had two kings. As another, the 18th-century Americans created three co-equal branches of government — the executive, legislative and judicial — and a balance of power between the central government and the states. It’s a model that remains in force as long as we adhere to that obsolete document, the Constitution.

Unfortunately, because Americans lack the necessary suspicion of government (the CNN poll results notwithstanding), we are gravitating toward something that, sadly, is never rendered obsolete: tyranny. Many will dispute this, as they call our movement toward absolute governmental power “progress.” Yet, it’s not a matter of opinion, as there is a way freedom can be measured.

A government enacts laws, and a law by definition is the removal of a freedom because it states that there is something you must or mustn’t do (this is *why* government is often called a necessary evil). Thus, the barometer of freedom is simple:

The more laws we have, the less free we are from state intrusion.

Now, consider that we continually enact more laws but hardly ever rescind any. What does this mean?

Every year we are less and less free.

This is a phenomenon that transcends president, party and policy. Call our government what you will — unconstitutional, socialist-leaning, progressive — the fact is that, as sand through an hourglass, our freedoms are being erased. It is a civilizational death by a thousand cuts.

And, take this process to its logical conclusion, and you end up in a very dark place: absolute governmental power.

How can this be avoided? As for the federal government, the solution is adherence to that “obsolete” document once taught in anachronisms known as civics classes. On the state level, one solution is the Defense against Tyranny Amendment, which would, as I [wrote](#) years ago:

place a constitutionally mandated cap on the number of laws that can be created.... This, of course, would require lawmakers to finally become law-takers, as they would have to strike legislation from the books until they reached the threshold imposed by the amendment. [Then,] if they wanted to enact a new law they would have to rescind an old one. This would ensure that the total amount of freedom (if not the type) we enjoyed would remain constant and at the level we deem necessary to remain a free people.

On a more basic level, we Americans need to cultivate a healthy suspicion of government. There are just too many among us who, while thoroughly suspicious of big business, believe that big government can “make people happy.” It’s an attitude that leads to a very unhappy place.