



The Founding Fathers' Fear of Power

ALLAN C. BROWNFELD

AMERICANS are subjected to a maze of rules and regulations by what is becoming an increasingly powerful governmental apparatus.

Government now feels that it has the right and the power to tell us to buckle our automobile seat belts, what drugs we may and may not take, what race and sex a job applicant must be to be hired, what distant school our children will be bused to attend, what kind of gasoline we must use in our cars . . . and this is only the beginning. On the horizon are plans for governmentally controlled medical care, national zoning in the form of land use legislation, national data banks which will know everything about us and our personal lives, and a host of other interferences in what we once believed was meant to be a free society. . . .

The Founding Fathers were deeply suspicious of centralized governmental power. It was this fear of total government which caused them to rebel against the arbitrary rule of King George III. In the Constitution they tried their best to construct a form of government which, through a series of checks and balances and a clear division of powers, would protect the individual. They believed that government was a necessary evil, not a positive good. They would shudder at popular assumptions which regard government as the answer to all of our problems and which allow public officials to claim rights superior to those of the men and women who have elected them.

In a letter to Edward Carrington, Thomas Jefferson wrote that, "The natural progress of things

is for liberty to yield and government to gain ground." He noted that "one of the most profound preferences in human nature is for satisfying one's needs and desires with the least possible exertion; for appropriating wealth produced by the labour of others, rather than producing it by one's own labour . . . the stronger and more centralized the government, the safer would be the guarantee of such monopolies; in other words, the stronger the government, the weaker the producer, the less consideration need be given him and the more might be taken away from him."

At the beginning of his Administration, Jefferson wrote a friend that, "The path we have to pursue is so quiet that we have nothing scarcely to propose to our Legislature. A noiseless course not meddling with the affairs of others, unattractive of notice, is a mark that society is going on in happiness."

Today, of course, there is almost no aspect of our lives that some agency of government does not consider within the province of its authority and control.

That government should be clearly limited and that power was a corrupting force was the essential perception held by the men who made the nation. In *The Federalist Papers*, James Madison declared that, "It may be a reflection on human nature that such devices should be necessary to control the abuses of government. But what is government itself but the greatest of all reflections on human nature? If men were angels, no government would be necessary. If angels were to govern men, neither external nor internal controls on government would be necessary. In framing a government which is to be administered by men over men, the great difficulty lies in this: you

must first enable the government to control the governed, and in the next place oblige it to control itself."

The Founding Fathers were not utopians. They understood man's nature and attempted to form a government which was consistent with—not contrary to—that nature. Alexander Hamilton pointed out that, "Here we have already seen enough of the fallacy and extravagance of those idle theories which have amused us with promises of an exemption from the imperfections, weaknesses, and evils incident to society in every shape. Is it not time to awake from the deceitful dream of a golden age, and to adopt as a practical maxim for the direction of our political conduct that we, as well as the other inhabitants of the globe, are yet remote from the happy empire of perfect wisdom and perfect virtue?"

Rather than viewing man and government in positive terms the Framers of the Constitution had almost precisely the opposite view. John Adams expressed the view that, "Whoever would found a state and make proper laws for the government of it must presume that all men are bad by nature." As if speaking to those who place ultimate faith in egalitarian democracy, Adams attempted to learn something from the pages of past history: "We may appeal to every page of history we have hitherto turned over, for proofs irrefragable, that the people, when they have been unchecked, have been as unjust, tyrannical, brutal, barbarous and cruel as any king or senate possessed of uncontrollable power All projects of government, formed upon a supposition of continual vigilance, sagacity, and virtue, firmness of the people, when possessed of the exercise of supreme power, are cheats and delusions The fundamental article of my political creed is that despotism, or unlimited sovereignty, or absolute power, is the same in a majority of a popular assembly, an aristocratical council, an oligarchical junta, and a single emperor. Equally arbitrary, cruel, bloody, and in every respect diabolical."

The political philosopher who had the most important impact

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upon the thinking of the Founding Fathers was John Locke. Locke repeatedly emphasized his suspicion of government power and believed that if the authorities violate their trust, the regime is to be dissolved.

It was Locke's view, in addition, that the legislative branch of government—that branch closest to the people and most subject to their control—should be the most powerful governmental branch. In his *Second Treatise*, Locke notes: "Yet the legislative being only a fiduciary power to act for certain ends, there remains still in the people a supreme power to remove or alter the legislative, when they find the legislative act contrary to the trust reposed in them And thus the community perpetually retains a supreme power of saving themselves from the attempts and designs of any body, even of their legislators, whenever they shall be so foolish or so wicked as to lay and carry on designs against the liberties and properties of the subject"

When the Articles of Confederation were being considered, fears of excessive concentration of authority were often expressed. The town of West Springfield Massachusetts, to cite one example, reminded its representatives of the "weakness of human nature and growing thirst for power It is freedom, Gentlemen, it is freedom, and not a choice of the forms of servitude for which we contend, and we rely on your fidelity, that you will not consent to the present plan of Union, till after the most calm and dispassionate examination you are fully convinced that it is well calculated to secure so great and desirable an object."

One of the early textbooks of the American patriots was *Cato's Letters*, the joint product of Thomas Gordon and John Trenchard. Written during 1720-23, it was widely read in the colonies together with James Burgh's *Political Disquisitions*. The basic concept stressed in both of these works is the evil effect of power. "The love of power is natural," wrote Burgh, "it is insatiable; it is whetted, not cloyed by possession."

Gordon and Trenchard observed that, "Power renders man wanton, insolent to others, and fond of themselves All history affords but few instances of men trusted with great power without abusing it, when with security they could." The people must retain power in their own hands, grant it sparingly, and then only under the strictest supervision. "The people can never be too jealous of their liberties," warned Burgh. "Power is of an elastic nature, ever extending itself and encroaching on the liberties of the subjects." *Cato* also believed that, "Political jealousy . . . in the people is a necessary and laudable passion." Therefore, the people must select their rulers with care, and these must be "narrowly watched and checked with Restraints stronger than their Temptation to break them." *Eternal Vigilance*

The written and spoken words of the men who led the Revolution give us numerous examples of their fear and suspicion of power and the men who held it. Samuel Adams asserted that "there is a degree of watchfulness over all men possessed of power or influ-

ence upon which the liberties of mankind much depend. It is necessary to guard against the infirmities of the best as well as the wickedness of the worst of men."

The corruption of power, the oppression of strong government—these were the vital, immediate dangers felt by those who waged the Revolution.

Today, unfortunately, government seems to be out of our control. Non-elected officials—bureaucrats—make rules which have the effect of law, controlling more and more aspects of our lives. Government is no longer viewed in negative terms, but is now viewed positively, as the answer to almost all of our social, economic, and political problems.

In 1800, Jefferson wrote of his belief that "a single consolidated government would become the most corrupt government on earth." Twenty-one years later he remarked that, "Our government is now taking so steady a course as to show by what road it will pass to destruction, to wit: by consolidation first, and then corruption, its necessary consequence."

ADVERT

Marx, Economic Growth and Land Taxation

BY FRED HARRISON

The transformation of pre-capitalist societies to a state of self-sustaining industrial growth is a central problem for the world today. The European industrial state is, generally speaking, the model to which most Third World countries aspire. The fundamental aim is to shift away from dependence on traditional agricultural activity and towards factory-based economies.

In this booklet, it is considered how agrarian societies can best undertake the transition, the economic metamorphosis which—for the established industrial societies—has raised the standards of living of ordinary people well above the level of subsistence which has been the normal condition of mankind.

Two theoretical approaches are examined. First, the theories of Karl Marx, who wrote while observing Asian and African colonies being subjected to the techniques and values of European colonial countries. Then, the ethical critique offered by the American economist, Henry George, who like Marx held a belief in a "surplus value" which ought to be communally owned and shared, though their views on the nature of that surplus differed markedly. Finally, a look is taken at the twists of history which shaped the development paths of two British colonies, India and Nigeria.

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