

Common Sense, 231 Years Later

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In the first three months of 1776, 120,000 copies of Thomas Paine's famous pamphlet "Common Sense" were printed for a population of 2.5 million in the 13 colonies. That would be equivalent to 15 million copies today. But today's American population is very different from the people who were inspired by that pamphlet 231 years ago.

Paine eloquently made the moral and philosophical case for the American Revolution, explaining why monarchies and hereditary succession were contrary to natural law and scripture, why it was foolish for the colonists to subsidize Britain's wars, and why the colonies didn't need the protection of the British navy.

Paine's case for revolution is of course no longer relevant to modern America. However, his comments about government and society are still highly relevant and show how far public opinion has shifted from individualism to statism since the Revolution.

While persuading the colonists of the need for their own government, Paine cautioned them that government, "even in its best state, is but a necessary evil." Government was necessary, Paine said, because some men do not obey their conscience and lead moral lives. Thus, all men had to surrender a part of their property to the government so that the government would protect the rest of their property from those who would take it. A government that performs this essential role "with the least expense and greatest benefit, is preferable to all others," said Paine.

Imagine a politician running on that platform today. He'd have to climb a tree to escape coonhounds in the media, who would snarl, yelp, and howl in unison about him being a mean-spirited, right-wing extremist. And the American public, having become accustomed to the government as nanny, teacher, doctor, spouse, sugar daddy, scold, dietician, and the font of all knowledge and wisdom, would stand around the tree like stereotypical Appalachian backwoodsmen, laughing at the treed fool and unable to comprehend the deeper meaning of the scene. Their education in government schoolhouses left no child behind, except for the 30 percent who drop out before graduation. Even sophisticates in New York City would stare in bewilderment, having become so subservient to the government that they can't decide on their own whether they should consume trans fat.

Nannyism is not the most serious problem facing America. The most serious problem is that Paine's moral case for government has

been turned on its head. The U.S. government has been transformed from a protector of property to a dealer in stolen goods, existing for the benefit of those who believe they have a right to other people's money, under the guise of social justice, fairness, and the common good.

Behind its marble facade and lofty rhetoric, Congress is essentially a huge chop-shop operation, but without the grime, dirty overalls, tattoos, razor wire, and pit bulls. In exchange for votes, members of Congress take property from citizens, chop it into untraceable pieces, and redistribute the loot to special interests in the form of handouts, subsidies, entitlements, and political favors. The other two branches of government condone the operation from behind their own marble facades and lofty rhetoric.

Unfortunately, this is not hyperbole. A century ago, only about 3 percent of federal spending went to "transfer payments," which is a government euphemism for "plunder." Today, more than half of government spending involves dealing in stolen goods. Worse, the parties to the crime are brazen about it.

For example, Iowa farmers wearing John Deere caps openly extort presidential candidates to raise everyone else's grocery prices through farm subsidies, AARP openly extorts Congress to give its 35 million members free medical care at the expense of future generations, dairy farmers lobby the USDA to maintain price controls that add 20 cents to each gallon of milk, rent-seeking conglomerates favor new regulations that will drive upstart competitors out of business, the National Education Association uses its formidable political power to feed the greed of its 3.2 million members, and thousands of other special interests back their trucks up to the loading dock of Congress to haul away the public's silverware in broad daylight.

Meanwhile, reporters stand around the loading dock with their hands in their pockets and their intelligence and inquisitiveness left under a desk in journalism school, oblivious to the immorality and unconstitutionality of what they are watching. Preferring to be gossip reporters instead of watchdogs of liberty in the model of renowned journalist H. L. Mencken (who never attended journalism school) they would rather cover the power struggles and personalities inside the chop shop than the true nature of the operation. As a result, the chop-shop operators get by with camouflaging their looting with platitudes, pedantry, pandering, and populism. One of them, Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.), is even praised for restricting the most important right of Americans—political speech.

Underlying today's statist thinking is a belief that society and government are one and the same, not different spheres as Paine wrote. To wit:

Some writers have so confounded society with government, as to leave little or no distinction between them; whereas they are not only different, but have different origins. Society is produced by our wants, and government by our wickedness; the former promotes our happiness positively by uniting our affections, the latter negatively by restraining our vices. The one encourages intercourse, the other distinctions. The first is a patron, the last a punisher.

Unfortunately, the conflation of society and government has unleashed our vices, not restrained them. Like a cancerous cell devouring a healthy one, government has grown at the expense of voluntary, mutually beneficial social relationships, especially family relationships. Lyndon Johnson's Great Society didn't turn out so well, but that hasn't stopped other presidents from inflicting their own versions on society. Society has become so full of metastatic vice, owing to social engineering, that it is now considered normal for 38 percent of children to be born out of wedlock, and for about half of them to live without their fathers in the home.

Forgetting what human history has taught about human nature, especially the nature of males, contemporary government-cum-society has encouraged men to walk away from their responsibilities and for women to "marry" the state. The result has been a marked increase in the social pathologies of poverty, crime, school dropouts, and behavioral and learning difficulties in school. Strangely, the conventional wisdom holds that the solution to the problems caused by government-cum-society is for government-cum-society to replace parents at an even earlier age in children's lives. Eventually, Plato's dream of the state's taking children away from parents at birth will be realized.

A socially engineered utopia is an expensive proposition, far more expensive than maintaining the British Empire under King George's rule.

From its founding until 1913, when ratification of the 16th Amendment authorized the taxation of incomes, the national government was funded mostly by property taxes, excise taxes, and tariffs on imports and exports. The only exceptions were at the time of the War Between the States and in 1884, when income taxes were enacted but ruled unconstitutional by the U.S. Supreme Court in 1885.

The 16th Amendment not only opened the tax floodgates, but also changed the relationship between United States citizens, and between citizens and their national government. Prior to 1913, Americans didn't lobby Congress to steal their neighbors' money

for themselves. And back then, it was none of the national government's business what Americans earned, where they worked, or what they did for a living. April 15 was just another day of the year, not the culmination of tax accountants' efforts to decipher 20,000 pages of the Internal Revenue Code.

In 1913, tax rates began at 1 percent of income and were capped at 7 percent for incomes above \$500,000 (about \$9.5 million in today's dollars). By 1936, the lowest rate had quadrupled, and the top rate had increased ten-fold.

In addition, the Social Security Act was passed in 1935. It was intended to provide unemployment compensation to workers who lost their jobs, and to give financial aid to the aged, needy, handicapped, and certain minors. Initially, Social Security taxes were 2 percent of income on the first \$3,000 of wages (about \$41,000 in today's dollars), with the employee and employer each paying 1 percent. Today, the Social Security tax rate (including Medicare) is 7.6 times greater and applies to more than twice the wages in constant dollars. But even with this huge tax increase, the unfunded liabilities for Social Security and Medicare total \$70 trillion.

In 1902, federal revenue was 1.3 percent of the nation's gross domestic product, versus 6.8 percent in 1940 and 16.3 percent in 2004. The Congressional Budget Office estimates that under current law, federal revenue will climb to 19.8 percent of GDP in 2016 and 23.7 percent in 2050.

In terms of national income, the share of the economy of all levels of government is 44 percent, or almost four times larger than their share prior to 1930.

Yet in spite of being fleeced by a government that makes King George look benevolent by comparison, Americans have no interest in grabbing their muskets, dumping tea in the bay, or reading an updated version of "Common Sense." Instead, they blame free enterprise and free trade for whatever insecurities they feel, although free enterprise and free trade, not government, have produced the highest standard of living in human history.

In 1776, Americans had the common sense to read, understand, and cheer "Common Sense." Today, they don't have the common sense to know that broccoli is healthier than a Big Mac, that a hair dryer shouldn't be used while bathing, that obesity is caused by overeating, that they need to save money for old age, or that they should talk to their children about drugs, sex, and homework. They now need to be told these things by the government. Of course, the more they are told such things by the government, the less common sense they have.

And that's how the government likes them: devoid of common sense.

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