

## Democracy DOA

October 2012

"Society in every state is a blessing, but government even in its best state is but a necessary evil; in its worst state an intolerable one." - Thomas Paine

From tavern debates in Lewes, England, to writing essays for a periodical owned by the nephew of Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Paine held an incendiary view towards the corrupt English ruling class. At the time, the British Empire was fading and the American empire rising, born from the aspirations of those tired of living under tyranny. Paine was to England what Martin Luther was to the Catholic Church, a spark that helped fuel empire destruction and the beginning of a new world order.

Thomas Paine and several household American historical figures used the notions of tyranny, corruption and liberty to conceive of the United States of America. From tyranny and corruption they sought liberty and self-rule. Yet here we are, not quite 250 years later, possibly confronting a new iteration of what inspired American independence.

Today individuals and businesses can't do anything without first going through the government approval, regulation and tax process. All roads now lead through government, represented by the rule creators, legal system, business regulators and dispute managers that earn their cut off virtually every action we take in our lives.

To be born, one must register with government. Raising children can only be done under the umbrella of government-approved processes. We can't legally work until at a government-approved age. Then once we can work, we must register with government so they can monitor our wages and extract their taxes. We can't marry without reporting to government, so of course there is a government process to divorce. To enjoy many of today's leisure activities requires a release from liability that the government arbitrates. And even to die, we must do so under the rules of government.

Every business is required to register with the government. We have rules that tell us who we can't discriminate from hiring, how much we must pay, which benefits we must provide and the hurdles we must jump to get rid of poor performers. We are told what we can and can't do with our natural resources, our land. We are told what we can make, what we must make and how we must make it. No product design or fabrication can be executed without government approval and oversight.

Today, government wages and benefits exceed those of the private sector, and certain areas of government, namely Congress, have their very own lucrative economic advantages. Who still has defined benefit retirement plans and lifetime healthcare? Who was not subject to insider trading rules on market investments? Who was able to front run their investments knowing what legislation would soon be passed? Whose wealth seems to grow measurably while working, and even more so after retiring to the benefits of I scratched your back now you scratch mine? Who really is the entitled class?

As in Paine's time, government seems to have become an all-consuming monster. It is like the new mafia, where everyone must pay to play...or else. Everyone must play by the rules set up by government educated and trained bureaucrats, most with zero private sector experience.

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It is as if we all now work for one reason...to support government and the institutions and infrastructure it has set up to "benefit the people," which has put us in an enormous financial hole. The Federal Reserve has recently committed to printing money indefinitely – an announcement that should be obvious evidence of government's enormous failings.

Is government today working to support the people or are the people working to support the government? What happened to the concept of liberty from an all-controlling state? Where did our foundation as a nation of self-rule get so off track? Maybe the first step is to understand this thing we so proudly support called democracy. What exactly is this democracy? Where did it come from?

Most people believe American democracy has existed from the very beginning, a foundation to our country laid out by the Founding Fathers. Wrong. Very, very wrong.

“I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America, and to the **Republic** for which it stands, one Nation under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.”

Where is democracy in our pledge of allegiance? It's not, because our Founding Fathers were not setting up a democracy. They were setting up a republic. Most of our Founding Fathers loathed government just as much as Thomas Paine, so they decided the rule of law was more important than the rule of majority. There is absolutely no mention of democracy in our Declaration of Independence or in the Constitution.

The notions of a republic and a democracy are often confused, but their distinctions are significant. A republic is a representative form of government that rules according to a law of the land. A democracy rules according to the majority. The first gives voice to the minority, the second causes the minority to fall victim to the majority. In a democracy, there are no limits on a government that must enforce the will of the majority. The purpose of the rule of law in a republic is to avoid this very issue by enumerating and limiting the powers of government. It is also designed to keep emotion out of government and politics, where a democracy – driven by whim – is particularly susceptible to emotion.

For several years, an email, the source of which is unknown, has circulated that reads: “A democracy cannot exist as a permanent form of government. It can only exist until the majority discovers it can vote itself largess out of the public treasury. After that, the majority always votes for the candidate promising the most benefits with the result that democracy collapses because of the loose fiscal policy ensuing, always to be followed by a dictatorship, then a monarchy.”

While the U.S. is not technically a democracy, the email's message no less rings true today. The 47% that one Presidential candidate described as dependent on government would logically vote to sustain their economic support. And of course the privileged business and government classes have their own versions of entitlement.

Was this the intent of our Founding Fathers? Is the support of so many, the control of so much by the arbiter of virtually every aspect of life and economy really such a good thing? Can we really call what government does support? Or might that be nothing more than the most modern derivative of an age-old problem for civilizations, more accurately defined as slavery? If one is dependent on the state, how can there be liberty? How can one develop any sense of personal responsibility when government rules over all, when government “takes care of” all?

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The more successful protector of liberty, a republic, is itself susceptible to the same risks of a democracy when it begins to function more and more like a democracy. Today, America seems ever more ruled by emotion – greed, guilt, resentment, pity and entitlement. The more emotion that has crept into our government process, the more it has crowded out self-responsibility, numbed the notions of empowerment that shaped our early republic and made twisting and bending the law of the land more and more tolerable. And inevitably, voters in greater numbers *have* discovered that they can, in fact, vote themselves into largess. At this rate, they will soon be a majority, and the minority will have no choice but to work to support the majority and the politicians who promise them things.

What was it that caused us to lose sight of the enormous insights provided by the true patriots of liberty? What caused us to stray so far from a republic?

As has been stated in previous essays, there is nothing like prosperity to numb the mind of self-discipline. Prosperity caused us to forget the tenets of a republic. Over many decades, we replaced a government that empowered us with one that took power and responsibility away from us. Democracy creep replaced enumerated powers with expanding powers, and overtook the pragmatic view of how things should be managed, trumping reason with emotion. Now, it's commonplace to believe that our wealth – personal and national – should be spread around in the name of fairness to all. But what is fair to all? Who makes that call? Of course, government makes that decision.

Government has its very own agenda, self-preservation and perpetuation. The purpose of every institution is not to destroy itself, but to grow its power and control. Yet government creates no product nor provides private sector service. Democracy creep has turned into government creep, which has turned into oversight creep and now entitlement creep. Once we began to think of ourselves as a democracy, we became set on the natural path of what happens when the mob rules.

Today government needs more and more money to support its very own institutions, to fix education, to maintain union labor, to regulate those nasty carbon polluters, to ensure the financial system they set up doesn't collapse, to ensure we have reasonably priced health care for everyone and eventually to keep building its dominion over every little aspect of our lives. Are we dependent on our own virtue and personal effort? Or, as the President recently suggested, is all that we accomplish today only possible because of government?

After the close of the Constitutional Convention in 1787, a woman is said to have asked Benjamin Franklin, as he departed Independence Hall, “Well Doctor, what have we got, a republic or a monarchy?” Franklin apparently replied, “A republic, madam, if you can keep it.”

From insecurity and desire to accomplishment and confidence to complacency and disaster. Today the Founding Fathers of the United States of America are likely turning over in their graves.



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