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Roosevelt's or Reagan's America? A Time for Choosing

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The following is adapted from a speech delivered at Hillsdale College on January 29, 2007, during a seminar on the topic, "America's Entitlement Society," co-sponsored by the Center for Constructive Alternatives and the Ludwig von Mises Lecture Series.

On January 11, 1944, President Franklin D. Roosevelt sent the text of his Annual Message to Congress. Under normal conditions, he would have delivered the message in person that evening at the Capitol. But he was recovering from the flu, and his doctor advised him not to leave the White House. So he delivered it as a fireside chat to the American people. It has been called the greatest speech of the century by Cass Sunstein, a prominent liberal law professor at the University of Chicago. It is an important speech because it is probably the most far-reaching attempt by an American president to legitimize the administrative or welfare state, based on the idea that government must guarantee social and economic security for all.

Thirty-seven years later, in his First Inaugural Address on January 20, 1981, President Ronald Reagan would deny that government could provide such a broad guarantee of security in a manner consistent with the protection of American liberty. Indeed, he would insist that bureaucratic government had become a danger to the survival of our freedom. In looking at the differences between the views of Roosevelt and Reagan, we can discern the distinction between a constitutional regime—in which the power of government is limited so as to enable the people to rule—and an administrative state, which presupposes the rule of a bureaucratic or intellectual elite.



FDR's New Bill of Rights

When Roosevelt spoke to the nation that January night, he was looking beyond the end of World War II. In recent years, he said, Americans

have joined with like-minded people in order to defend ourselves in a world that has been gravely threatened with gangster rule. But I do not think that any of us Americans can be content with mere survival. Sacrifices that we and our Allies are making impose upon us all a sacred obligation to see to it that out of this war we and our children will gain something better than mere survival.

And what was this “sacred obligation?” Roosevelt continued:

The one supreme objective for the future, which we discussed for each nation individually, and for all the United Nations, can be summed up in one word: Security. And that means not only physical security which provides safety from attacks by aggressors. It means also economic security, social security, moral security—in a family of Nations.

Government has a sacred duty, in other words, to provide security as a fundamental human right.

Roosevelt was well aware that this was a departure from the traditional understanding of the role of American government:

This Republic had its beginning, and grew to its present strength, under the protection of certain inalienable political rights—among them the right of free speech, free press, free worship, trial by jury, freedom from unreasonable searches and seizures. They were our rights to life and liberty. As our Nation has grown in size and stature, however—as our industrial economy expanded—these political rights proved inadequate to assure us equality in the pursuit of happiness. We have come to a clear realization of the fact that true individual freedom cannot exist without economic security and independence. “Necessitous men are not free men.” People who are

hungry and out of a job are the stuff of which dictatorships are made. In our day these economic truths have become accepted as self-evident. We have accepted, so to speak, a second Bill of Rights under which a new basis of security and prosperity can be established for all. . . .

Among these new rights, Roosevelt said, are “The right to a useful and remunerative job in the industries, or shops or farms or mines of the Nation; The right to earn enough to provide adequate food and clothing and recreation; The right of every farmer to raise and sell his products at a return which will give him and his family a decent living; The right of every businessman, large and small, to trade in an atmosphere of freedom from unfair competition and domination by monopolies at home or abroad; The right of every family to a decent home; The right to adequate medical care and the opportunity to achieve and enjoy good health; The right to adequate protection from the economic fears of old age, sickness, accident, and unemployment; The right to a good education.”

The Constitution had established a limited government which presupposed an autonomous civil society and a free economy. But such freedom had led inevitably to social inequality, which in Roosevelt’s view had made Americans insecure in a way that was unacceptable. He had lost faith in the older constitutional principle of limited government. Rather, he thought that the protection of political rights—or of social and economic liberty, exercised by individuals unregulated by government—had made it impossible to establish a foundation for social justice, i.e., what he called “equality in the pursuit of happiness.” He assumed that a fundamental tension exists between equality and liberty that can only be resolved by a powerful, even unlimited, administrative or welfare state.

Rejecting the Founders

The American founders, by contrast, thought that equality and liberty were perfectly compatible—indeed, that they were opposite sides of the same coin. The principle of natural equality had been set forth in the Declaration of Independence, which clearly spelled out the way in which all human beings are the same: They are equally endowed with natural and inalienable rights.

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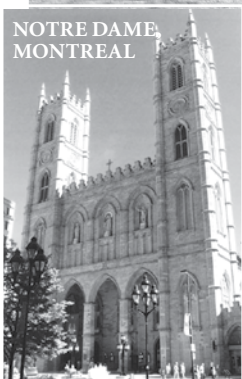
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But along with this similarity, the Founders knew that differences are sown into human nature: some people are smarter, some are stronger, some are more beautiful, some are musically inclined while others have a predilection for business, etc. Political equality, which requires the protection of individual rights, produces social inequality (or unequal achievement) precisely because of these unequal natural faculties. The preservation of freedom, therefore, in the Founders' view, requires a defense of private property, understood in terms of the protection of the individual citizen's rights of conscience, opinion, self-interest and labor. They thought that a constitutional order, by separating church and state, government and civil society, and the public and private sphere, makes it possible to reconcile equality and liberty in a reasonable way that is compatible with the nature of man. Thus the Constitution limits the power of government to the protection of natural rights.

Roosevelt and his fellow progressives rejected the idea of natural differences between men, insisting that those differences arise only out of social and economic inequality. As a result, they redefined the idea of freedom, divorcing it from the idea of individual rights and identifying it instead with the idea of security. It was in the cause of this new understanding of freedom that America's constitutional form of limited government was gradually replaced—beginning with the New Deal and culminating in the late 1960s and 1970s—by an administrative or welfare state.

Roosevelt had made it clear, even before he was elected president, that government had a new and different role to play in American life than that assigned to it by the Constitution. In an October 1932 radio address, he stated: “. . . I have . . . described the spirit of my program as a ‘new deal,’ which is plain English for a changed concept of the duty and responsibility of Government toward economic life.” In his view, selfish behavior on the part of individuals and corporations must give way to rational social action informed by a benevolent government and the organized intelligence of the bureaucracy. Consequently, the role of government was no longer the protection of the natural or political rights of individuals. The old constitutional distinction between government and society—or between the public and private spheres—as the ground of liberalism and a bulwark against political tyranny had created, in Roosevelt's view, economic tyranny. To solve this, government itself would become a tool of benevolence working on behalf of the people.

This redefinition of the role of government carried with it a new understanding of the role of the American people. In Roosevelt's Commonwealth Club address of 1932, he said:

The Declaration of Independence discusses the problem of government in terms of a contract. . . . Under such a contract, rulers were accorded power, and the people consented to that power on consideration that they be accorded certain rights. The task of statesmanship has always been the redefinition of these rights in terms of a changing and growing social order. New conditions impose new requirements upon government and those who conduct government.

But this idea of a compact between government and the people is contrary to both the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. Indeed, what links the Declaration and the Constitution is the idea of the people as autonomous and sovereign, and government as the people's creation and servant. Jefferson, in the Declaration, clearly presented the relationship in this way: “to secure these [inalienable] rights, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed” Similarly, the Constitution begins by institutionalizing the authority of the people: “*We the People* of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defence, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.”

In Roosevelt's reinterpretation, on the other hand, government determines the conditions of social compact, thereby diminishing not only the authority of the Constitution but undermining the effective sovereignty of the people.

Reagan's Attempt to Turn the Tide

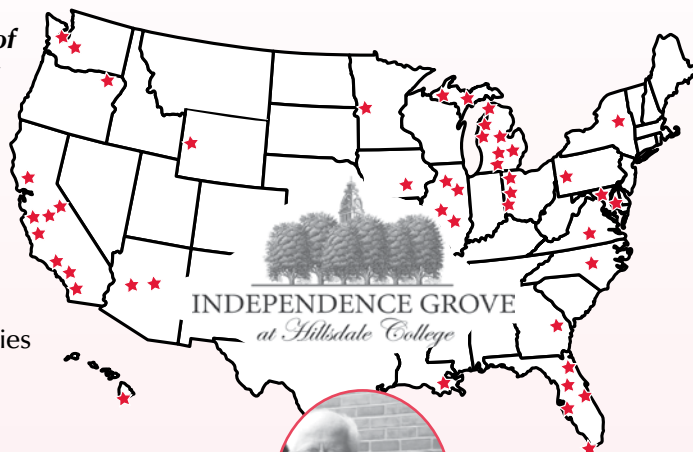
Ronald Reagan addressed this problem of sovereignty at some length in his First Inaugural, in which he observed famously: “In this present crisis, government is not the solution to our problem, government *is* the problem.” He was speaking specifically of the deep economic ills that plagued the nation at the time of his election. But he was also speaking about the growing power of a bureaucratic and intellectual elite. This elite,

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he argued, was undermining the capacity of the people to control what had become, in effect, an unelected government. Thus it was undermining self-government itself.

The perceived failure of the U.S. economy during the Great Depression had provided the occasion for expanding the role of the federal government in administering the private sector. Reagan insisted in 1981 that government had proved itself incapable of solving the problems of the economy or of society. As for the relationship between the people and the government, Reagan did not view it, as Roosevelt had, in terms of the people consenting to the government on the condition that government grant them certain rights. Rather, he insisted:

We are a nation that has a government—not the other way around. And this makes us special among the nations of the Earth. Our government has no power except that granted it by the people. It is time to check and reverse the growth of government, which shows signs of having grown beyond the consent of the governed.

In Reagan's view it was the individual, not government, who was to be credited with producing the things of greatest value in America:

If we look to the answer as to why for so many years we achieved so much, prospered as no other people on Earth, it was because here in this land we unleashed the energy and individual genius of man to a greater extent than has ever been done before. Freedom and the dignity of the individual have been more available and assured here than in any other place on Earth.

And it was the lack of trust in the people which posed the greatest danger to freedom:

... we've been tempted to believe that society has become too complex to be managed by self-rule, that government by an elite group is superior to government for, by, and of the people. Well, if no one among us is capable of governing himself, then who among us has the capacity to govern someone else?

Reagan had been long convinced that the continued growth of the bureaucratic state could lead to the loss of freedom. In his famous 1964 speech, “A Time for Choosing,” delivered on behalf of Barry Goldwater, he had said:

. . . it doesn't require expropriation or confiscation of private property or business to impose socialism on a people. What does it mean whether you hold the deed or the title to your business or property if the government holds the power of life and death over that business or property? Such machinery already exists. The government can find some charge to bring against any concern it chooses to prosecute. Every businessman has his own tale of harassment. Somewhere a perversion has taken place. Our natural, inalienable rights are now considered to be a dispensation of government, and freedom has never been so fragile, so close to slipping from our grasp as it is at this moment.

Reagan made it clear that centralized control of the economy and society by the federal government could not be accomplished without undermining individual rights and establishing coercive and despotic control.

. . . “the full power of centralized government” was the very thing the Founding Fathers sought to minimize. They knew that governments don't control *things*. A government can't control the economy without controlling *people*. And they knew when a government sets out to do that, it must use force and coercion to achieve its purpose. They also knew, those Founding Fathers, that outside of its legitimate functions, government does nothing as well or as economically as the private sector of the economy.

Over the next 15 years, Reagan succeeded in mobilizing a powerful sentiment against the excesses of big government. In doing so, he revived the debate over the importance of limited government for the preservation of a free society. And his theme would remain constant throughout his presidency. In his final State of the Union message, Reagan proclaimed “that the most exciting revolution ever known to humankind began with three simple words: ‘We the People,’ the revolutionary notion that the people grant government

its rights, and not the other way around.” And in his Farewell Address to the nation, he said: “Ours was the first revolution in the history of mankind that truly reversed the course of government, and with three little words: ‘We the People.’” He never wavered in his insistence that modern government had become a problem, primarily because it sought to replace the people as central to the American constitutional order.

Like the Founders, Reagan understood human nature to be unchanging—and thus tyranny, like selfishness, to be a problem coeval with human life. Experience had taught the Founders to regard those who govern with the same degree of suspicion as those who are governed—equally subject to selfish or tyrannical opinions, passions, and interests. Consequently, they did not attempt to mandate the good society or social justice by legislation, because they doubted that it was humanly possible to do so. Rather they attempted to create a free society, in which the people themselves could determine the conditions necessary for the good life. By establishing a constitutional government of limited power, they placed their trust in the people.

Up or Down, Not Right or Left

The political debate in America today is often portrayed as being between progressives (or the political left) and reactionaries (or the political right), the former working for change on behalf of a glorious future and the latter resisting that change. Reagan denied these labels because they are based on the idea that human nature can be transformed such that government can bring about a perfect society. In his 1964 speech, he noted:

You and I are told increasingly that we have to choose between a left or right. Well I would like to suggest that there is no such thing as a left or right. There is only an up or down—up to man's age-old dream, the ultimate in individual freedom consistent with law and order, or down to the ant heap of totalitarianism. And regardless of their sincerity, their humanitarian motives, those who would trade our freedom for security have embarked on this downward course.



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In light of the differences between the ideas and policies of Roosevelt and Reagan, it is not surprising that political debates today are so bitter. Indeed, they resemble the religious quarrels that once convulsed western society. The progressive defenders of the bureaucratic state see government as the source of benevolence, the moral embodiment of the collective desire to bring about social justice as a practical reality. They believe that only mean-spirited reactionaries can object to a government whose purpose is to bring about this good end. Defenders of the older constitutionalism, meanwhile, see the bureaucratic state as increasingly tyrannical and destructive of inalienable rights.

Ironically, the American regime was the first to solve the problem of religion in politics. Religion, too, had sought to establish the just or good society—the city of God—upon earth. But as

the Founders knew, this attempt had simply led to various forms of clerical tyranny. Under the American Constitution, individuals would have religious liberty but churches would not have the power to enforce their claims on behalf of the good life. Today, with the replacement of limited government constitutionalism by an administrative state, we see the emergence of a new form of elite, seeking to establish a new form of perfect justice. But as the Founders and Reagan understood, in the absence of angels governing men, or men becoming angels, limited government remains the most reasonable and just form of human government.



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