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July/August 2014 · Volume 43, Number 7/8

## Renewing the American Idea

Paul Ryan

U.S. House of Representatives



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*The following is adapted from an Independence Day Address delivered on July 15, 2014, at Hillsdale College's Allan P. Kirby, Jr. Center for Constitutional Studies and Citizenship in Washington, D.C.*

**You might** think it's a little late to give an Independence Day address, but New York's delegates to the Continental Congress didn't vote to approve the Declaration of Independence until July 15. So I'd like to think I'm fashionably late—or as they'd say in New York, "right on time." But the topic is always timely, because the Declaration of Independence remains the defining statement of the American Idea and the greatest political statement of human liberty.

We all know the stories about how the American Revolution was a difficult and often desperate struggle. But we forget in hindsight how unlikely it was that our forefathers would succeed. Many times defeat seemed all but inevitable. Yet that small band of patriot-statesmen achieved victory against a long-established ruler of seemingly unlimited power and authority. They did so by remaining dedicated to America's cause and to each other . . . fighting hard at every turn . . . knowing that their success or failure would determine whether they, or possibly any people, would ever fight again for the great cause of self-government.

America has survived many great trials, and it has prospered and endured. I believe we are in a period of great trial again. Yet I am confident that our country can

survive, prosper, and endure for generations to come. But all this depends—as it did in the spring of 1776, and in the fall of 1860, and at the end of 1941—on how we act to shape the course of events.

On the surface, the problem seems obvious: Our current president treats the rule of law like a rule of thumb. But look more closely, and you’ll see the problem isn’t this president—or at least not only this president. When he leaves office, there will be plenty of politicians like him ready to take his place. All he’s done is continue to empower a certain governing philosophy—one at odds with our Founding principles. This governing philosophy has been gaining ground for a very long time, and continues to do so. The point is, the opponents of American conservatism see politics as a long-term project; we conservatives need to do the same.

In everything we do—in every policy we propose—we need to renew the American Idea. Conservatism in our nation is not about the past. It’s not a misty-eyed nostalgia for a world that’s come and gone. And it’s not a skittish disposition to “go it slow”—to tinker around the edges. Nor is American conservatism about blind opposition to government. For sure, government today is too big, bureaucratic, inefficient, and unaccountable. But we must not jettison the very rule of law that shields our liberty. No, American conservatism is about conserving something—principles that are timeless because they are true—to be renewed and applied in our time.

What is the American Idea? In

short, it is self-government under the rule of law. It is rooted in our respect for the rights with which we are each endowed, a respect that shapes a society where every person can work hard, achieve success, and advance in life. For almost all of human history, a very different idea reigned supreme: the idea that people are fundamentally unequal, some born to rule and others to obey. Almost all were subjects or serfs—shorn of all distinction and with no ability to move up in the world or to provide a better future for their children. America’s Founders rebelled against this. They declared that human beings are created equal, with unalienable rights that come from God. They declared that government is legitimate only if it secures these rights. They were the first to announce to the world—and then to prove by their example—that the best government rests on the consent of the governed.

Proving it by example wasn’t easy. The Founders’ first attempt at organizing a government—under the Articles of Confederation—failed. So they produced a new Constitution that both strengthened and limited the federal government. It gave Congress power to legislate for the common good. But it also gave the president and the courts power to push back when Congress overreached—and vice versa. The very structure of the federal government was a vindication of self-government—the three branches would control each other so that none of them could control the people. Limiting the powers of government and allowing the associations of civil society to flourish would make safety and security,

**Imprimis** (im-pri-mis),  
[Latin]: in the first place

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So in addition to our birth certificate, the Founders gave us the blueprint for a free society: a set of unchanging principles, as well as a framework of government for a growing nation. But it was more than a set of abstract ideas and a procedural code of law. Our Declaration and our Constitution define nothing less than a way of life for a people—a free people of good character, who would labor for themselves, their families, and their communities, grateful to the Creator for their rights, and committed to providing the blessings of liberty to their posterity.

The Founders disagreed among themselves about many particulars in the Constitution. No sooner had it gone into effect than they added a Bill of Rights. Each generation struggled with different issues. Could Congress create a bank? Could the president buy Louisiana? Could the federal government build roads and bridges? But there was one thing on which they all agreed: The Constitution was our guide and the Declaration our North Star. And the Constitution endured because it allowed prudent statesmen to make wise decisions that preserved self-government under the rule of law.

There was one massive injustice left unsolved by the Founding generation: slavery. All the leading Founders knew well that slavery was wrong. But they also knew they couldn't end it there and then and still hold the Union together. That work fell to Abraham Lincoln. He accomplished this not by departing from the principles of the Declaration and the Constitution, but by returning to them. In the struggle of the Civil War, the Declaration defined the high ground, and the Constitution proved powerful enough to reunite a shattered nation. Completed with three postwar Amendments, the Constitution emancipated and secured citizenship for millions.

Having endured for over 100 years, the Constitution was a victim of its own success. As our cities grew more

crowded—and our economy more prosperous and unpredictable—some came to believe the Constitution was obsolete. For the first time, it was said that we needed a wholesale change. The Founding project was over, some argued, and the age of “administration” had begun. Newer and more complicated times called for a “living” Constitution, one whose meaning did not rest on fixed principles but changed according to the prevailing winds of time. In this Progressive vision, self-government should give way to technical expertise, to professional bureaucrats governing according to centralized plans.

The Founders believed in the ability of men and women to govern themselves and distrusted unchecked power, which is why they limited government and promoted a robust civil society. Progressives believed in a much larger and more active central government that reaches further and further into our lives and shrinks the scope of civil society. Unfortunately, through fits and starts over the course of the 20th century, the Progressive view came to dominate the modern Democratic Party—and to cloud Republican thinking as well. This is the core problem we face today.

The American Idea has not been rejected. Far from it: The Progressive counter-vision has never commanded a settled majority. Americans embrace some programs first championed by Progressives, but reject others. They accept many aspects of modern government, while still insisting on individual rights and constitutional forms. They have never consented to have their lives micromanaged by bureaucrats.

So how should American conservatives proceed? We must begin by recognizing practical reality, but at the same time move—sometimes coaxing, sometimes pushing—toward the enduring principles to which we are dedicated. Maneuvering in the sea of politics, we will sometimes be forced to tack—but must always be guided by and steer toward our fixed North Star.

## The Problem of Big

Jim DeMint

President, Heritage Foundation  
Former U.S. Senator



*Hillsdale College President Larry P. Arnn and Heritage Foundation President Jim DeMint sat down to discuss Senator DeMint's new book, *Falling in Love With America Again*, at the College's Kirby Center in Washington, D.C., on April 21, 2014. The following is an excerpt from that book.*

**So long** as there are only two ways to get ahead—the legitimate way, which leads to earned success, and the illegitimate way, which leads to unearned success or, if things go wrong, to jail—the system of freedom and responsibility we call democratic capitalism works very well.

As a rule, people who make good choices (who work hard, play by the rules, and live within their means) succeed, and people who make bad choices (who don't work hard, don't play by the rules, and live beyond their means) fail.

This goes for institutions large and small, and for people powerful and weak. The rules for all of us start with the law and, ultimately, the U.S. Constitution.

One of the problems of Big—a Big is an organization that has reached such a size that its continued existence and success is no longer contingent upon its quality of service; this dubious distinction finds its highest manifestation in our bloated government—is that it creates a third option: neither obeying the rules nor breaking the rules, but changing the rules as you go. That's what happens in cronyism, which is in effect legal cheating. Emphasis on the *legal*.

That is one of the most frustrating aspects of the crisis of Big: Most of the time there is no crime to prosecute. The institutions change the rules, so what would have been cheating, and what many people see as cheating, is actually blessed by the state. The transactions of crony capitalism—campaign contributions on the one side, policy changes on the other—are all perfectly legal.

This is why so much of the criticism of special interests as such is incomplete, or even misdirected. Attacking special interests for accepting government favors is like criticizing a four-year-old for eating ice cream for breakfast. The proper targets of criticism are not the beneficiaries of the bad policy, but those in charge who acquiesce to their requests—the government agencies that provide the favors; the parents who allow their kids to eat whatever they want.

When government officials change policies to benefit special interests, the responsibility for the “cheating” lies with the officials, not the special interests. They, after all, are only playing by the rules the government sets. As long as politicians effectively put the rules of the game up for sale, it's hard to fault people for trying to buy or rent them.

... Despite all the promises you hear from politicians, big government does not really help the little guy. Big government fosters big business, big unions, and big costs to taxpayers. Big government and its big partners rob individuals and our nation of freedom, opportunity, and prosperity. ■

Self-government under the rule of law—which rests upon the fact that we are endowed equally with fundamental rights—is the touchstone of American conservatism. Keeping it always in mind will allow us to identify measures that conform to the American Idea, as well as those that weaken or conflict with the American Idea. It provides us a sure guide for reform.

Here's a practical distinction: There is a difference in principle—a clear bright line—between two kinds of government programs. On the one hand, there are those that can be repaired and restructured within the bounds of limited government. Let's review those, and seek to reform and upgrade them, making them more efficient through market mechanisms, more decentralized and transparent, more fiscally sound and more conducive to self-government.

On the other hand, some government programs require massive bureaucracies to direct large segments of our society and economy through arbitrary regulations that increase uncertainty and insecurity. These programs, which have resulted in a hodgepodge of boards and commissions with uncertain responsibilities and unaccountable decision-making, undermine self-government. The way they operate also creates relationships between government and money that encourage cronyism and breed political corruption. More and more Americans are right to see these programs as threats to their freedom. They are incompatible with the American Idea, and they must be rejected.

The American Idea imposes a duty to oppose programs that subvert popular government and impose bureaucratic rule. These programs and their administrative forms—leading examples are Obamacare and the Dodd-Frank financial apparatus—cannot be reformed and restructured, but must be ended or, if we choose, replaced by something completely different and consistent with popular consent and self-government. No reform is possible without recognizing this problem. No reform is worth

pursuing that does not turn against this rule and take us on the path of renewal.

\* \* \*

Now, the Progressives were right about something: The country was crying out for a national safety net, especially following the Great Depression. Americans agreed that we should pool our resources to protect hardworking families. And yes, they wanted smart, talented people to run the federal government. But they didn't want those smart, talented people to run their lives. They wanted to enlist the federal government in the service of self-government. They didn't want to turn over the keys.

Progressives didn't respect this distinction. Once they got their foot in the door, they kept pushing. First there was the New Deal, then the Fair Deal, then the Great Society. In 2008, they saw another opening. This was their chance to cement the Progressive philosophy into place. They characterized what they were doing as a logical extension of the safety net. If you liked Medicare, they said, you'll love Obamacare. But it hasn't worked out that way. Instead, the people resisted. And the Left is baffled.

Here's the difference: Everybody understands the safety net, and everybody benefits from it. Take Social Security. We all know how it works—or at least how it's supposed to work. When you're working, you pay in. And when you're retired, it pays out. It's the same thing with Medicare—simple, straightforward. Everybody gets old. Everybody gets sick. And so everybody contributes in exchange for a secure retirement. Most people think that's a fair trade. And I agree.

The Affordable Care Act is a completely different kind of program. Nobody understands it, and it makes everyone anxious. If you listened to the sales pitch, it seemed simple enough: Every business with over 50 full-time employees must offer health insurance—period. Or, as it turned out, maybe not—maybe you can get a delay . . . or a waiver . . . or an exemption. How do you get these things? Nobody



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knows. The administration makes decisions on the fly, so the law changes every day. Under Obamacare, an autonomous board called IPAB decides what kind of care those on Medicare will receive in the future. Bureaucrats are calling the shots and running the show.

Or take Dodd-Frank. Some say it's like deposit insurance. But deposit insurance protects the little guy. Dodd-Frank protects the big guys—the biggest, most powerful financial institutions in the country. The result is predictable: Big banks get bigger and small banks get fewer. More insidious is that this law vastly expands the power of bureaucrats to take over the daily operations of any large financial institution they deem to be in trouble. Thus the skepticism.

In short, the difference between the safety net and the Progressive bureaucracy is the difference between fair play and playing favorites.

The safety net jibes with self-government; the Progressive agenda does not. The safety net gives people more control over their lives, while the Progressive agenda takes that control away. And there's a key underlying principle: The reason you have more control with the safety net is that you earned it. You paid in. You made the difference. That's the very heart of self-government: We the people are the masters of our fate. We

can improve our lot by dint of our own efforts—by working together of our own free will. Nobody has to force us or oversee us. Earned success and earned security go hand in hand.

Now, don't get me wrong. Everything wasn't hunky-dory until this president came to town. Social Security and Medicare have been going broke for years. Politicians have made promises they couldn't keep, and the bill is about to come due. We conservatives must be committed to strengthening these programs—because that's what hardworking taxpayers have expressed a desire for in election after election, and it is what they deserve. Limited government with popular consent is the principle we're trying to uphold.

Every idea I've proposed would give people more control over their future. They paid in all these years so they would have health insurance. Why not let them choose their health insurance? More choice means more freedom. The conservative argument isn't just that reducing bureaucracy is more efficient—it's that it increases self-government. And the argument against the Progressive agenda isn't just that it's more expensive—it's that it undermines self-government.

This is a key distinction—one we need to keep in mind—because there's

another fallacy popular among conservative ranks. Just as some think that anything government does is wrong, others seem to think that anything business does is right. But in fact, they're two sides of the same coin. Both big government and big business like to stack the deck in their favor. And though they are sometimes adversaries, they are far too often allies.

Bureaucrats favor big business over the upstarts. Large companies are more predictable—and easier to control. So government tips the scales in their favor, instead of letting competition sort things out. And big business is a willing accomplice—because regulation keeps the competition out. Many times, large corporations don't oppose new regulations; indeed, they help write them. The point is, crony capitalism isn't a side effect—it's a direct result of big government.

We can see the consequences throughout our economy. It used to be that only the success stories were household names. Now the failures are: Solyndra, Fisker, Tesla. Big businessmen spend less and less time hustling in the marketplace, and more and more time lining the halls of government. And of course bureaucrats as well as businessmen take part in this culture of double standards. Consider the IRS. It requires every family to keep seven years' worth of tax records, but it can't keep six months' worth of emails. It's a disgrace.

The American Founders would not recognize in this stratified system a truly open market of commerce. It isn't open. It isn't equal in opportunity. It isn't producing equitable profit growth or hope for those at the bottom of the ladder. It isn't driven by markets seeking to satisfy people's needs—it is driven by experts, calculus, wealth, and preference.

Congressman Jeb Hensarling has recently launched a great challenge against the crony capitalist economy, and in particular against the

Export-Import Bank. This bank is just one example of how bureaucratic government is corrupting free enterprise. Conservatives must stop defending it. Cronyism is the *Progressives'* tool for economic control. Let them defend it.

Finally, there is a temptation among conservatives to ask courts to intervene and solve our problems for us. Some of us think of judges the way Progressives think of bureaucrats: technical experts with the solutions to constitutional conflicts. But we can't rely on the courts alone to defend our rights. Judges, like bureaucrats, are often the problem. It is true the Supreme Court can be an ally in conflicts involving the Constitution; but it can also be an adversary. So let's remember that under our Constitution of self-government, the court that really counts is the court of public opinion, where the American people hand down their verdict each election day.

To bring the argument full circle, let us never forget that a people who claim the right of self-government are always on trial. Out of our first trial, during the Revolutionary era, we adopted the greatest and longest surviving Constitution ever written. We were tried in a great Civil War, in two World Wars, during depressions and inflations, and we survived and prospered. Every effort to stamp out American self-government has been defeated . . . so far. Will we now prevail again?

Nothing in history is inevitable. If we are to get through our current trial, as we have done in the past, it will be by the use of our wits and through tremendous effort. In this sense, the Constitution isn't a living document so much as a life-giving document. It gives purpose and direction to our way of life as a free people. Let us remain committed to the

American Idea. With the inherent good sense of the American people, we can, we must—and I believe we will—get through this great trial together, freer and stronger than ever before. ■



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