



BILL KEFFER: OUR RESIGNATION OF DEPENDENCE

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A Guest Opinion-Editorial

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In American history and government classes across this country, we still teach our children that our founding fathers demonstrated genius both in articulating the inalienable rights belonging to each person in our Declaration of Independence, and then in preserving those rights in our Constitution. Their sole and emphatic purpose in imposing a system of checks and balances among the three branches of the federal government was to prevent the accumulation of power; and in imposing a system of federalism between the national and state governments to prevent the usurpation of authority rightfully belonging to the states or to the people. The genius, then, was not only in proclaiming the natural rights of man, but also in acknowledging the need to protect those rights from man's natural desire for power.

Man's desire for power does not always come from those with evil or corrupt motives. It also arises in those who believe they are possessed of beneficent, even magnanimous intentions. There are two simple reasons, however, why our founders were not fooled by the promised good intentions of their fellow man: today's seemingly good intentions become tomorrow's despotism; and the price of accepting the good intentions of government is paid for with a loss in liberty and a surrender in self-reliance.

Our founders unequivocally understood these stark truths. Upon the passage of the Constitution at the Constitutional Convention, a citizen of Philadelphia passing by Independence Hall asked Benjamin Franklin what kind of government had just been decided on. Franklin famously responded: "A republic, if you can keep it." Franklin clearly knew that the greatest vulnerability of self-government is when its citizens realize they can manipulate government for their own selfish desires, taxing revenue away from others for purposes that stray farther and farther beyond the boundaries of constitutional legitimacy.

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Thomas Jefferson also profoundly observed that "the natural progress of things is for liberty to yield and government to gain ground." In other words, left to their own natural behavior, men will add to their power in and through government, which will necessarily erode the amount of freedom enjoyed by those living under that government. Stated yet another way, where diligence, vigilance, and perseverance must be exercised is in resisting the natural tendency of man and government to seek more power. It is as if we as citizens are driving the eighteen-wheeler of government that is perpetually out of alignment, constantly requiring us to put all of our weight against the steering wheel to keep our big rig from heading straight into the bar ditch, if not ultimately off the cliff.

And yet, just as pitiful and ironic as the addict who knows that the alcohol or drug he craves is the very same thing that is killing him, Americans continue to hand over their freedoms and relinquish their independence and individual responsibility – those attributes that have uniquely defined what it is to be an "American" - to an increasingly intrusive and expansive government made up of individuals who are all too willing to become that very concentration of accumulated power that our founders feared and attempted to prevent with the Constitution they ratified.

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While our leaders in government are certainly culpable in accepting this excessive power, often embracing and even pursuing it, ultimately the greatest blame lies at the feet of the Americans who have permitted, even demanded that it happen. That is, in our panic to deal with the inescapable emergencies of life, we have all too often accepted the alleged helping hand of government and have grown only more expectant of government's proffered solutions to our personal and financial difficulties. While we once purposely proscribed governmental interference – certainly interference by the federal government – in our daily affairs, we now apparently consider it to be irresponsible of government not to interfere, with the unprecedented expectation that the government of today led by the men of today are somehow different from the governments and men of yesterday and are no longer in need of the constitutional limitations we once considered the secret of our success.

And, so, we find ourselves as Americans in the twenty-first century and heirs to the genius of our founders at yet another historic crossroad in our nation's story. We watch our elected leaders taxing and spending incomprehensible amounts of the posterity intended for our generation and for the generations to come, in order to bail out corporations that (we are told) are too big to fail; entire industries that represent too much American tradition to be allowed to collapse; one of our largest states, whose budget shortfall alone is more than the gross national product of most countries; and Americans whose varying conditions of unemployment, retirement, and health coverage propel them to unhesitatingly surrender their dignity in exchange for a willing – even permanent – dependence on government for their welfare.

Our founders, who for an uncertain cause but certain treason were willing to sacrifice their lives, their fortunes, and their sacred honor – and the patriots who, in fact, did give up their lives and fortunes, so that we could embark on this great experiment in self-government – would be heartbroken and dumbfounded at how easily

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we have abdicated our independence and individual responsibility, and how subservient and deferential we have become to a government that was originally designed to be our servant, rather than our master. Is this really the future about which they dreamed and for which they died?

We seem ready to accept the trendy rationalization that action ceding massive power and control to the federal government must be taken because certain entities, industries, and markets are just too big to fail. Have we also deluded ourselves into believing that our nation is somehow too big to

fail? That kind of hubris is more likely the telltale sign of the very real possibility of what we consider to be impossible. President Obama has proclaimed that we are the change that we have been waiting for; it is likely more accurate that we are exactly who the founders were trying to protect us from. In 233 years, we have fallen from the heights of proclaiming to the world our eloquent and profound Declaration of Independence to the depths of whimpering this resignation of dependence.

The hope promised by President Obama is not ultimately the hope of freedom and opportunity that has been the historical signature of America. Instead, it is the insidious siren call of immediate relief to an impatient and impulsive people, in exchange for expanded governmental servitude, a wholly un-American principle. True hope, however, lies in Americans rediscovering and embracing the principles of our founders and the proper relationship between government and the governed as reflected in our Constitution. It is time for the current generation of prodigal Americans to return to our roots and once again practice the principles we continue to acknowledge as genius in our textbooks and classrooms and to which we have erected countless monuments

and memorials all over this country. It is time for us to return to the unique blueprint of self-government that has permitted America to be the shining city on the hill that Ronald Reagan so eloquently described. It is time for us to admit that our salvation does not, and cannot ever, lie in government. It is time for us to liberate those who have been dependent on government for too long, to prevent a new, even more-expansive generation from being enslaved to government, and to promote an unabashed return to self-reliance. It is time for us to start acting like Americans.

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