

How can we return to limited government?

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If Patrick Henry could revisit the United States today, he would be speaking at Tea Party rallies throughout the nation, proclaiming to the crowds at every rally, "I told you so!"

Patrick Henry was one of the founders who opposed replacing the Articles of Confederation with the constitution of 1787. He, and many others, argued that the constitution would endow the federal government with too much power. To use an analogy, the opponents of the constitution argued that — despite the high-minded intentions of the framers — the constitution would create a government that would have the potential of becoming a Frankenstein monster. The ultimate argument was not over what was intended but what could happen. In the Federalist Papers, James Madison and Alexander Hamilton sought to quell these fears by arguing that the powers of the federal government were enumerated, and were thereby limited, and that the states would keep federal power in check within these designated boundaries.

As they say, hindsight is 20-20, and we can now see that Madison and Hamilton were wrong, and that Henry and his opposition colleagues were right. The ultimate determinant of the extent of federal power would not be the states but the federal government itself. This follows from the fact that the federal government would be more powerful than any state — a primary reason for replacing the Articles of Confederation — so the federal government would be able to win any conflict between itself and a state. The northern victory in the Civil War starkly illustrates this fact.

In this light, those of us who are concerned about excessive federal power are asking how we can return to the limited government that was envisioned at the founding. But, in fact, this concern over excessive government power applies not just to the federal government, but to state government, county government, and city government, as well. The problem is simply worse the larger the government. Hence, the problem we face applies to all democratic governments: every democratic government of substantial size inevitably acquires excessive power.

How can we solve the problem of excessive government power? We can solve the problem based on two fundamental insights:

- ◆ **The problem of excessive government power is not discrete.**
- ◆ **Everything costs money.**

Let's consider each insight, in turn.

The problem of excessive government power is not discrete, so we can't determine precisely what government should and should not do, as, for example, in drawing a circle in the sand and saying that every grain of sand that falls outside the circle is excessive. Let's put this insight in historical perspective.

Archeologists can trace the development of government from its early forms in Mesopotamian city-states of the 2000s BC. At that time, a powerful ruler claimed to be a representative of a god, and when he died, his servants were sacrificed and buried with him. Human sacrifice was implemented on behalf of the state in other regions, as well, such as China and Latin America, and the common people were required to labor for the state on a massive scale in most early states, as in Egypt and Latin America. As state governance matures from this early stage, we see, in the historical record, an overall trend toward individual rights and democracy, especially in the last 500 years since the Renaissance and the Reformation.

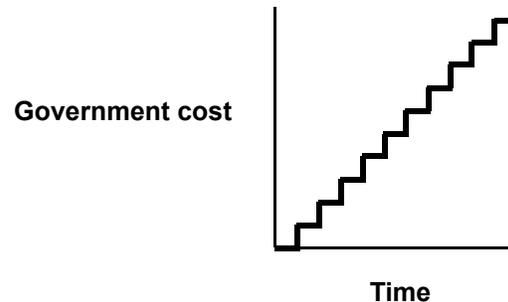
The United States constitution of 1787 adapted the long-evolving British government — as conceptualized by the French theorist Montesquieu — and expressed the result in compact, written form. But the result is not a document that discretely specifies precisely what the resulting federal government should and should not do because human language is necessarily subject to interpretation. To illustrate, every Supreme Court ruling that has augmented the power of the federal government over the past 200 years was conceived by its supporters on the court as a reasonable interpretation of the language of the constitution.

Hence, in practice the concept of returning to limited government must mean establishing a means for continuing the maturation process of the past 5000 years — continuing progress toward a greater realization of individual rights and democracy — a greater realization of government of the people, by the people, and for the people.

How can we establish such a program? By noting the second observation given above: *everything costs money*.

Since everything costs money, everything that a government does costs money. Hence, the party that controls the ability of a government to get money ultimately controls the government because it can strangle the government. As a result, in order for we, the people, to control the growth of government power, we must control the ability of the government to get our money.

The staircase figure illustrates the growth of the cost of government. A vertical rise represents liberal control of gov-

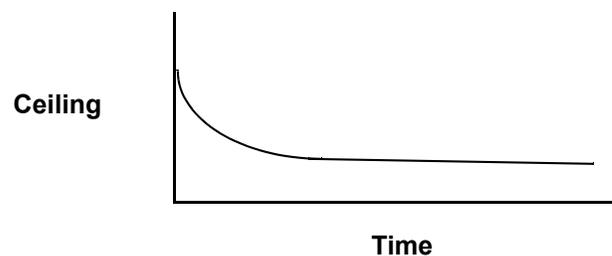


ernment, while a horizontal step represents conservative control of government at its best. The most that conservatives can normally hope to do is prevent the cost of government from rising until the next liberal takeover since it is nearly impossible for conservatives to repeal a program that liberals have installed. As a result, liberals are in overall control of the growth of government. The cost of government is driven inexorably upward by interest groups that each wants a cut of government money. Interest groups, in turn, control a legislature through a divide-and-conquer strategy because legislator votes must be public so that constituents can hold their legislators accountable.

What can the people do to stop this growth and reverse it? The people must control the ability of the government to take their money. We can get a feel for the potential of this solution because the voters of Washington State tend to approve initiatives for fiscal restraint. Although Washington voters tend to elect fiscal liberals to office, when they are more directly asked, in an initiative, if they want government to show fiscal restraint, they usually say yes.

How can the people control the ability of the government to get their money? The people need to control a ceiling on government income+debt, with the ceiling expressed as a percentage of the income of the economy. This will allow government income to grow as the income of the economy grows. Only the people can change the ceiling, and they can lower it if they wish, thereby providing a means for reducing the cost of government through popular mandate. This will solve the fiscal problem, not only because the people earn the money and own the money and, hence, will protect their money, but also because the people are not subject to the divide-and-conquer strategy of interest groups since their votes are private.

The graph illustrates the result of this solution: **a long-term maturation process**. Over time, the people can lower



their ceiling on government income+debt, and through this objective, continuous means, they can motivate government officials to make government operations as efficient as possible and to discontinue programs that are either unnecessary or that can be performed in the private sector, where they will benefit from the incentives of competition. Finally, a citizen-controlled ceiling will provide a platform for conservative candidates to use in running for office by identifying with the people through plans to make government as efficient as possible and as lean as feasible.