

Populist #9 Constitutional Democracy as a Defense against Centralized Power

The establishment of a Constitutional Democracy in the United States, by which I mean a form of government where the final check and balance on the power of the federal authorities is directly in the hands of the People, with the Bill of Rights serving to protect the liberty of all citizens, will provide the greatest protection against the dangers of centralized power.

Nothing is more assured from the history of the world, than that some forms of government are better fitted for justice than others. It is impossible to study the history of nearly all forms of popular or representative government without experiencing a feeling of repulsion at the extremes of injustice to which many of the people have eventually been exposed. A litany of the world's most infamous tyrants have emerged from republics in nations such as Italy, Germany, France and Russia; gaining control from the inherent weakness of republics which is that they allow an easy opportunity for corruption and consolidation. In consulting the great wisdom of human experience, we can plainly see that these governments have obviously exhibited occasional calm and prosperity, but for the mind that thinks with clarity and reason, they have too often ended in severe levels of tyranny. If temporary glimmers of hope shine through and give us thoughts of praise for their brilliance, they at the same time warn us to deplore the defects of republican government that allow despotic mutations and distort their positive direction.

From the evils that defile the histories of those representative governments, and others of the popular form, the champions of totalitarian government have promoted arguments against not only expanding popular involvement in government, but against the very pillars of civil liberty upon which our nation was founded. I do trust that the people of America, with their inherent love of self-reliance and liberty, will affirm that the surest protection against our federal government's march towards despotism, as well as the greatest protection against this same situation in the future, rests solely in the hands of the people; exercising their will in a popular democratic government.

During the creation of the American republic over two centuries ago, it was well-established that our representative assembly was necessary primarily because the exigencies of the day made it impossible for the whole of society to assemble and make laws. This assembly was meant to be, in miniature, an exact representation of the people at large; to think, feel, reason, and act like the citizens. Equal interests amongst the people were to have equal representation in Congress, and extensive effort was to be taken to ensure this. Considerable experience has shown us that it would be foolish to believe that these goals have ever been attained.

It is obvious, and was discussed in greater detail in a previous number of these papers, that the people cannot remain free for long when power is increasingly concentrated in the hands of the few. My reasons for this are as follows:

1. A government of concentrated power, that does not truly represent the interests of the people, is highly vulnerable to all the weaknesses, evils, and indiscretions of an individual. It is dependent upon personal enticements, self-interests, prejudices, or passions, and subsequently leads, all too often, to evil intentions, tyrannical designs, and foolish decisions. All these errors and deficiencies must be corrected by the controlling power of the will of the people.
2. A government of concentrated power is inclined to be greedy and self-serving, and in time it will not be unwilling to prevent excessive obligations, which it will lay on the people without regret. We are experiencing such greed today with a national debt that threatens to bring our nation to its knees. A government of the people, with constitutional limitations, will prevent individuals and small groups from so easily plunging our country into near-irreversible debt.

3. A government of concentrated power is inclined to be too ambitious, and as time proceeds, will continue to vote itself and its related branches increasing amounts of power; eventually leaving butchered the last vestiges of popular control over government. It is a widely-accepted maxim that power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely; individuals and groups that gain power tend to seek to increase their power, thus resulting in a greater potential for corruption. As discussed in previous numbers of these papers, this has happened in an alarming number of representative governments throughout history. A government of the people, with constitutional limitations, prevents groups and individuals from consolidating federal power, since the final authority of the government rests in the entirety of the general public.

4. A government of concentrated power is unfit to consistently govern in the name of millions of people that have many varying motivations, backgrounds, interests and the like.

5. A government of concentrated power is even more unqualified to be involved in the judiciary branch of government; as their self-serving interests will certainly impair any potential for prudence when selecting judges that will serve for life, and whose decisions have the potential of drastically altering the course of our future.

6. Since such a federal structure, composed of all the powers of government, will rule in its own interest, conduct foreign affairs in its own interest, engage in war in its own interest, arbitrate disputes in its own interest, and make and enforce laws in its own interest.

The power of government ought to be more complex, and not wholly in the hands of the elite few. Such an organization of government, such a reckless scheme, might acknowledge and attempt to achieve the aims of those people who do not have the qualifications to extend their influence outside their narrow circles of personal intrigue; but it could never advance the happiness or prosperity of the people of America. It will clearly be shown, in the course of this investigation, that such a federal structure has, and will continue to be, the cause of serious disorder, deceit, and foolishness in our government.

Without the creation of representative government, it is quite possible that humankind would have been obligated to live perpetually under the rule of a single person. It is the creation of this form which we must celebrate; it is also this which must impel us to demand further advancements in the structure of government, and the eventual administration of liberty and justice for all. With this, I find it proper to quote John Adams:

"But what do we mean by the American Revolution? Do we mean the American war? The Revolution was effected before the war commenced. The Revolution was in the minds and hearts of the people; a change in their religious sentiments, of their duties and obligations... This radical change in the principles, opinions, sentiments, and affections of the people was the real American Revolution."

I will continue this discussion on the necessity of changing our system of government to that of a Constitutional Democracy in my next paper on August 25, 2005.

In the spirit of liberty and prosperity,

Franklin