

# Paul Begala and the Boston Tea Party



In December I was asked to give a speech on the 227th anniversary of one of the most stirring events in American history, the Boston Tea Party. We all learned about it in grade school and high school, and it's a great story, with the patriots dressing up like Indians and dumping the tea in the harbor.

But do our children learn *why* the American patriots dumped the tea in the harbor? Were they just vandals?

A lot of people say that the Americans were paranoid—the Tea Act actually made tea cheaper, so what were they complaining about? A new book by a distinguished professor, which has gotten gushing reviews, says that “anti-government” paranoia is rampant among Americans. The book is *A Necessary Evil: A History of American Distrust of Government* by Garry Wills of Northwestern University (discussed in *Cato Policy Report*, July–August 2000). Wills just doesn't understand why Americans from Sam Adams to U.S. Term Limits fear the concentration of power. More power in government, after all, he thinks, could feed the hungry, clothe the naked, house the homeless, maybe even cause the lion to lie down with the lamb.

In fact, the American patriots were not paranoid. They had good reason to be skeptical about power and its abuse, based on first principles and history. Their principles told them that the British government had no *right* to tax the colonies, even at a lower rate. And their reading of history told them that power is always a threat to liberty and must always be watched closely. Watching the British government's actions, they became suspicious that they were seeing, as the Declaration of Independence put it three years later, “a history of repeated injuries and usurpations, all having in direct object the establishment of an absolute tyranny over these states.” They saw what was happening in the East Indies, with a government-sanctioned monopoly on trade, and they didn't want that in America.

They had read their John Locke, who told them to fear power because you just don't know what people—even good people—will do when they get it. That's not paranoia. And after the experience of the 20th century, it should be common sense. Thanks to the courage of the Sons of Liberty and other Americans, we live in a generally free, peaceful, and prosperous society, so most Americans are pretty complacent about government power. But just consider some of the recent ways our government has displayed the same tendencies that worried Thomas Jefferson and the Sons of Liberty:

- OSHA has claimed the power to regulate the workspaces in our homes.
- The FBI has set up a new system to wiretap all our e-mail. At

least they're honest enough to call it Carnivore.

- We arrest a million people a year in a futile attempt to “win the war on drugs.”
- Governments at all levels are trying to force our kids into failing public schools for more hours, more days, and more years.
- The Justice Department is trying to steal half the company Bill Gates built.
- The government is projecting a \$5 trillion surplus, and most of our elected officials don't think we should return any of it to the people who created the wealth and paid the taxes.
- And what the Clinton administration has done to the Constitution and the rule of law would fill a book, which the Cato Institute recently published (*The Rule of Law in the Wake of Clinton*, edited by Roger Pilon).

One of the things the Clinton administration perfected was the habit of ruling by decree—just the sort of thing that Locke warned about and the Sons of Liberty feared—only now we have gentler terms like “executive order.” Whenever the president can't persuade our elected representatives to give him the laws he wants, he acts like one of the kings of old and just issues an executive order. Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt blithely told the Associated Press, “Here we are, having achieved 80 percent of what was sought in legislation, by administrative rule.” Here's how Clinton politico Paul Begala described President Clinton's use of executive orders:

“Stroke of the pen, law of the land. Kinda cool.”

That's why the patriots threw the tea in the harbor, so that Americans would never be subject to such arbitrary power.

We need Sons and Daughters of Liberty today in America. We need them in the schools, and in the media, and in every workplace. We need them on the Internet and sometimes on the picket lines. We need them to make sure officeholders never forget what it's like to live under the laws and pay the taxes, and we need them to run for office themselves. We even need a few of them in Washington, in the belly of the beast.

That's where the Cato Institute comes in. Our new *Cato Handbook for Congress* offers 64 chapters of advice to members of Congress. It will also serve as a citizens' handbook on important policy issues. The books, studies, and public appearances of our scholars reveal to all the failure of many federal programs and the alternatives that are consistent with our Constitution and common sense.

Throwing tea in the harbor got the attention of the English king and Parliament, but more important, it got the attention of other Americans. We see Cato's mission, to “increase the understanding of public policies based on the principles of limited government, free markets, individual liberty, and peace,” as the 21st-century equivalent.

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—David Boaz