

The Essence of America



Thomas Jefferson must be spinning in his grave. First, conservative columnist George Will names him Man of the Millennium because his call for a limited government protecting the individual's rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness defines America. The next thing you know, Will is celebrating what he perceives to be conservatives and liberals joining hands in support of Big Government in the wake of the terrorist attacks on America.

Will exults that "conservatism, redefined by a president eager to treat even education in grades K through 12 as a presidential responsibility, has shed its residual resentment of Washington's pervasive role in life here at home." As for the liberals, he writes, "Today the Democratic Party provides scant comfort" for those who think the United States shouldn't be the world's policeman. Hallelujah! We're all New Deal interventionists now.

And it's not just the Hamiltonian side of George Will's split personality getting the best of him. More predictable pundits are also taking advantage of the atrocities of September 11 to promote long-held support for expansive government. The *New York Times* writes, "Suddenly, the political language of a generation looks dated: Nobody wants to get the government off their backs." *Washington Post* columnist Jim Hoagland argues that now Congress "will have to return government closer to the center of American life, not whittle away further at its powers and funding."

This is all utter nonsense. What happened on September 11 was an abject failure of Big Government. The federal agencies assigned the important task of protecting our homeland against terrorist attacks were clueless. And if, as some argue, they had some clues, they failed to act on them. So we should take this failure to provide a basic function of government as proof positive that we need more government in our lives? Please.

Put aside for the moment such silly notions as that in recent decades we've been "whittling away" at the size of government. It's bigger than ever, more intrusive than ever, and taxing us at historically high rates. What the attacks of September 11 (and whatever horrible events might transpire before you receive this) should do is make us focus more closely on what America is all about.

Those attacks were attacks on the essence of America. They were not attacks on the "mixed economy" or on the "Third Way." They were attacks on true liberalism—the idea that individual human life is important and that social institutions should reflect that fact. America is a great nation because it was created with a Declaration of Independence and a Constitution designed to acknowledge and enhance the importance and dignity of human beings. Tens of mil-

lions of people from all over the globe often gave up everything just to come here to live in the land of the free. But over the past 70 years we've increasingly neglected the significance of America, and that has been reflected in our public policies.

Today, we have a national retirement program called Social Security that forces Americans to pay 12.4 percent of their income into a "system" that gives total control of their earnings to 535 politicians. We have no right to the money, we cannot leave it to our loved ones; and what we get back is entirely up to those politicians. Where is the respect for the dignity of human life in such a system?

We have more or less turned education—not car manufacturing or computer technology, but the education of our children!—over to the government. Bureaucrats tell most of us where our children must go to school. Never mind how safe the school is or whether it educates or even what it intends to teach the children. That's not your choice. Where is the American dignity in such a system?

Our tax code is an embarrassment to the American founding. It treats us like so many gerbils. Do this and you'll get some sugar water. Do that and you'll get an electric shock. Conservative and liberal politicians alike delight in using the tax code to make us behave as they think appropriate. Where is the human dignity in such social engineering?

Libertarians are not "anti-government." Perhaps we shouldn't go along with phrasing the debate as one between big government and small government. What we actually believe in is limited government as opposed to pervasive government. And the "limited" refers to the proper role of government. At a time of threats to our very existence as a nation, that role may properly require government to do more in defense of our liberties than it would in more peaceful times. But to suggest that these threats—as many, many people have—somehow argue for a more expansive role for government in our day-to-day lives is absurd.

No, George Will, the *New York Times*, and the *Washington Post* are wrong. We've been attacked by pre-Enlightenment savages who have contempt for human life. We've been attacked precisely because our nation is seen as the symbol for respect for individual rights and human autonomy. That autonomy—control over one's own life—is the essence of the American experiment in respect for the dignity of humanity. As such, it calls for less government involvement in our lives, not more.

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—Edward H. Crane