

Sovereignty or corrupt Puppet government?

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Is Government 'Us' or is It 'Them'?

From the very beginning of our national history, Americans have been arguing about the proper role of government. Put succinctly, the dispute is between those who regard government as "them" and those who see it as "us."

Our two founding documents embody the tension in its classical form. ***The Declaration of Independence locates sovereignty in the individual citizen***, who possesses the rights of "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness," as Thomas Jefferson so lyrically put it, and the power of government is described as an alien force that must be put on the permanent defensive.

The Constitution enshrines "THE PEOPLE" as the sovereign agent, with a Bill of Rights that defines a protected region where government cannot intrude, but otherwise identifies a collective interest best managed by a federal government empowered to make decisions for the society as a whole.

All of U.S. political history can be understood as a perpetual debate between these two competing perspectives, symbolized at the start in the clash between Jefferson and Alexander Hamilton.

The Jeffersonian position, with its emphasis on a minimalist government, prevailed throughout the 19th century and imprinted itself on the DNA of American culture as a quasi-sacred political creed.

By the start of the 20th century, as the United States became a more densely populated, ethnically diverse society with an industrial economy dominated by large corporations, the Jeffersonian perspective grew increasingly anachronistic. It became abundantly clear that government power was necessary to regulate the swoonish swings of the marketplace, provide a safety net for poor and elderly citizens, and protect the environment. Thus the Federal Reserve Board, Social Security, Medicare and the Environmental Protection Agency.

But despite these projections of the Hamiltonian ethos, which presumes that there is a collective public interest that only government can serve, the Jeffersonian ethos remains a potent force and not just in the right wing of the Republican Party. It colors the conversation about all the major domestic problems facing the Obama administration in ways that stigmatize as socialistic what we might ironically describe as the self-evident solutions.

In the health care debate, for example, there is a national consensus that we have a broken and bloated system. But instead of replacing it with the kind of single-payer government-run system adopted by most of the developed countries on the planet, that option is ruled out of order at the start of the debate. As a result, the best we can hope for is modest reform of an inherently flawed and expensive system.

To take another example, in the ongoing banking crisis, the removal of government regulations permitted major banks to assume unconscionable amounts of debt, much of it in the form of toxic

investments that still remain on the books. It has been obvious that the banks needed to be temporarily nationalized to force them to purge bad debts from their portfolios.

But fear that the stock market would interpret this course as creeping socialism has prevented such straightforward action. So we are still waiting for many of the same self-described financial wizards who created our fiscal mess to get us the rest of the way out of it.

Our response to global warming is likely to meet the same fate. If there was ever a problem that demanded a coherent public response by government in the "us" mode, the threat to life on Earth as we know it would seem to be it. But "cap-and-trade" legislation, designed to reduce carbon in the atmosphere through government-created emission "allowances" that can be traded for money, is currently on life support in Congress, another victim of the deep-seated aversion to Washington's intrusion in the marketplace.

For much of our history, the Jeffersonian hostility to an energetic federal government served us well. But with the end of the frontier and the shift from an agrarian to an industrial economy, the expanding role of government in protecting and assuring our "life, liberty and pursuit of happiness" has become utterly essential.

All the major problems now befuddling us -- the destructive excesses of finance capitalism, a profit-based health-care system, an increasingly contaminated atmosphere -- are only soluble if we regard government as the chosen representative of our collective interests as a people and a nation.

No less an American hero than George Washington put it rather defiantly in 1785: "We are either a united people, or we are not. If the former, let us, in all matters of general concern act as a nation. ... If we are not, let us no longer act a farce by pretending it."

And even Jefferson acknowledged that his anti-government vision would become irrelevant once we ceased being an agricultural society and that future generations -- meaning us -- would at some point need to throw off what he called "the [corrupt hand of the present AND the] dead hand of the past."

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