



CASCADE POLICY INSTITUTE

CASCADE COMMENTARY

June 2003

No. 2003-20

Summary

On July 4, 1776 the 2nd Continental Congress adopted the Declaration of Independence, which was principally written by Thomas Jefferson. Before and after the American Revolution, Jefferson was an intellectual force in advancing the ideas of liberty and a limited constitutional government. The ideas of the third president of the United States merit study and reverence year round, and special reflection on Independence Day.

Word count: 827

“Were we directed from Washington when to sow, and when to reap, we should soon want bread.”

– Thomas Jefferson

To declare independence

By Kurt T. Weber

Thomas Jefferson contributed greatly to the cause of liberty and a limited constitutional government in these United States, and his ideas deserve study throughout the year. However, there is special cause to reflect upon them as Independence Day draws near. On July 4, 1776 the 2nd Continental Congress adopted the Declaration of Independence, which was written principally by Jefferson.

The third president of these United States, Jefferson stated he was no friend of “an energetic government.” The functions of the federal government were to be severely limited. It should be a “rigorously frugal and simple” government, one “which shall restrain men from injuring one another, shall leave them otherwise free to regulate their own pursuits of industry and improvement, and shall not take from the mouth of labor the bread it has earned.”

In his first annual Message to Congress Jefferson stated, there was “reasonable ground of confidence that we may now safely dispense with all the internal taxes....” He gloated over keeping taxation low. In his second Inaugural Address he said, “it may be the pleasure and pride of an American to ask, what farmer, what mechanic, what laborer, ever sees a tax-gatherer of the United States?”

Jefferson knew that governments had the “general tendency to multiply offices and dependencies, and to increase expense to the ultimate term of burden which the citizen [could] bear.” Thus, he believed, taxes should be cut at every possible chance, lest “government shall itself consume the residue of what it was instituted to guard.”

Jefferson believed in minimal taxation because it would also keep the government from engaging in military adventurism. He maintained, “sound principles will not justify our taxing the industry of our fellow citizens to accumulate treasure for wars to happen we know not when, and which might not perhaps happen but from the temptations offered by that treasure.” Jefferson had little use for an interventionist foreign policy. He advocated “free commerce with all nations; political connections with none; and little or no diplomatic establishment. And I am not for linking ourselves by new treatise with the quarrels of Europe; entering that field of slaughter to preserve their balance, or joining in the confederacy of Kings to war against the principles of liberty.”

The father of the University of Virginia knew well that tricks other than direct taxation could be employed to balloon government unnecessarily – specifically, federal borrowing. Jefferson felt so strongly that he desired “a single Amendment to our Constitution” to prohibit it. This Amendment would be the sole force necessary “for the reduction of our government to the genuine principles of our Constitution...” A national bank, or federal reserve system, according to Jefferson, did not fall within the “genuine principles of our Constitution.” In a letter to then-President Washington, he put forth that a national bank would open “a boundless field of power, no longer susceptible of any definition.”

The principles of limited government were strongly embraced by Jefferson because he religiously felt that Americans were capable of solving their problems – individually and collectively. In a letter to M. Dupont de Nemours, comparing the United States’ government to that of the French, Jefferson declared, we “both consider the people as our children, and love them with parental affection. But you love them as infants whom you are afraid to trust without nurses; and I as adults whom I freely leave to self-government.”

Self-government was extremely important to Jefferson. “What has destroyed liberty and the rights of man in every government which has ever existed under the sun?” asked Jefferson, but the “generalizing and concentrating [of] all cares and powers into one body...” To him, “the inconveniences attending too much liberty” were preferable to “those attending too small a degree of it.”

Incorporated into Jefferson’s self-government ideals was that free markets were necessary to protect liberty and foment prosperity. Jefferson warned, “Were we directed from Washington when to sow, and when to reap, we should soon want bread.” Freedom to trade leads to general prosperity, but it is also the foundation of personal liberty, the right to follow one’s own conscious, which Jefferson forcefully defended.

In 1789 Jefferson wrote, “There are rights which it is useless to surrender to the government, and which governments have yet always been found to invade. These are the rights of thinking, and publishing our thoughts by speaking or writing; the right of free commerce; the right of personal freedom.” In a September 23, 1800 letter to Dr. Benjamin Rush he penned, “I have sworn upon the altar of God, eternal hostility against every form of tyranny over the mind of man.” These immortal words are carved into the Jefferson Memorial in Washington, DC.

Take time this Independence Day to reflect upon the principles of a man who greatly influenced the founding of this country. Remember the sacrifices made to set this nation’s course towards freedom, and the vigilance necessary to further realize Thomas Jefferson’s vision of a free and prosperous people.

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