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Constitution guarantees freedom, not a cushy life

By: Tom G. Del Beccaro

In the weeks before the fight over a new Supreme Court justice takes place, it is worthy to note that we are not remaining true to the purpose of our Constitution. In the years after the Revolutionary War, our Founders had specific goals when they wrote our Constitution. Chief among those was certainly "a more perfect union." It also was, however, to ensure that Americans would never again be ruled by their government.

When asked about the Revolutionary War, John Adams would say:

"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."

In that light, we can understand that that revolution of the mind meant that the war was not about the exchange of one set of rulers for another set of masters - it was about exchanging rulers for liberty. After all, Patrick Henry did not ask for a set of American rulers or his demise. His demand was, "Give me liberty or give me death!" On the battlefield, General Washington put Henry's demand into action when addressing the Continental Army by offering this stark choice: "The time is now near at hand which must probably determine whether Americans are to be freemen or slaves."

In the years after the Constitution was adopted, its purpose perhaps was summarized best by Sen. Daniel Webster, who wrote:

"Good intentions will always be pleaded for every assumption of authority. It is hardly too strong to say that the Constitution was made to guard the people against the dangers of good intentions. There are men in all ages who mean to govern well, but they mean to govern. They promise to be good masters, but they mean to be masters."

The Founders well understood the temptations of a wider, more active government. They were acutely aware that a larger, more powerful government - in pursuit of social perfection - had the downside of diminishing freedom - a price they thought too high to pay for an enterprise that was more than unlikely to succeed. Jefferson expressed part of that sentiment when he wrote, "Government can do something for the people only in proportion as it can do something to the people."

So, caught up with this idea of limiting government, both Madison and Jefferson argued that the federal government could not build roads. Jefferson stated that "the federal government could not go forward with these public projects without an amendment to the Constitution... because the objects now recommended are not among those enumerated in the Constitution." Truly, consider how very elemental the building of

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roads must have been to promoting the "general welfare" of a rural country. Yet that was not the legal role of government, according to those who wrote our Constitution.

Jefferson went on to warn posterity, "The natural progress of things is for government to gain ground and for liberty to yield." And so, by 1946, without so much as a constitutional amendment, those of good intentions enacted the Employment Act, which made it the duty of the federal government and its agencies, including the newly created Council of Economic Advisers, to use all practicable means "to promote maximum employment, production and purchasing power." In other words, we became a government of good intentions.

Today, politicians literally speak of the "rights" of people as they attempt to guarantee a certain standard of living for their constituent-subjects. Of course, most recently, the federal government took on the role of guaranteeing that Americans had a minimum standard of health care because, to the government, it was a right - however unenumerated.

Now, it would be one thing if a government could actually guarantee such standards of living, but it cannot. After all, before the Great Society was enacted to take on the War on Poverty, the government-measured poverty rate was 14 percent. The pre-Great Society federal budget was less than \$130 billion. Since then, we have spent tens of trillions of dollars in good intentions and have a nearly \$4 trillion budget, yet the poverty rate remains virtually the same 14 percent.

In the process, of course, we have diminished freedoms immeasurably - whether by forcing people to pay for those trillions or by being forced to be subject to government rules. Many now understand Jefferson's warning that "Government can do something for the people only in proportion as it can do something to the people." They are also just beginning to understand economist Milton Friedman's wisdom that, "A society that puts equality before freedom will get neither." Our Founders understood that, as well. That is why they attempted to guard against good intentions in favor of guaranteeing freedom. We would do well to honor their experiment with freedom by doing the same.

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