



# The *Danger* of Dependency

By Matthew Spalding

**INDEPENDENCE WAS THE THEME** of the American Revolution. The colonists sought independence not only from Great Britain, but also from military occupation, royal overseers, arbitrary laws, taxation without representation, and—as it says in the Declaration of Independence—all that “evinces a design to reduce them under absolute Despotism.”

A better way to understand independence is to recall the classical goal of self-sufficiency. Not exclusively or even primarily material, self-sufficiency encompasses more a sense of moral purpose and well-being. For Americans, this meant freely choosing their own leaders, establishing their own laws, and setting up a government to ensure their own safety and happiness, or as the Declaration of Independence says, “to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and Nature’s God entitle them” and obtain the full power to do the “Acts and Things which Independent States may of right do.”



The opposite of independence is *dependence*, which the American Founders deplored. As Thomas Jefferson said, “Dependence begets subservience and venality, suffocates the germ of virtue, and prepares fit tools for the designs of ambition.”

In establishing a new nation, the challenge was to create the institutional arrangements for restricting power and securing the rights promised in the Declaration of Independence while preserving a republican form of government that reflected the consent of the governed. The American Founders sought to assure independence and prevent dependence in two ways.

The first was to limit the power and scope of government. They did this by creating a strong government of adequate but limited powers, all carefully enumerated in a written constitution. A diversity of opinions would make it nearly impossible to form a majority on narrow interests that are contrary to the common good. Thus, the greatest bulwark of our independence as a self-governing people is our limited government.

Second, the Founders wanted to encourage the flourishing of the institutions of civil society—families, churches, schools, voluntary associations, and charitable organizations—that would not only form the habits of and create the conditions for an independent, self-governing citizenry, but also perform and provide charity and assistance to meet the demands of social responsibility.

The American Founders understood the need for a minimal safety net but believed that the primary method of helping the poor and preventing dependence was through the non-governmental sphere of civil society, on the one hand, and the promotion of economic independence, on the other.

Benjamin Franklin wrote that “the best way of doing good to the poor, is not making them easy *in* poverty, but leading or driving them *out* of it,” and observed that the growing wel-

fare system in England removed “the greatest of all inducements to industry, frugality, and sobriety, by giving [the poor] a *dependence* on somewhat else than a careful accumulation [of wealth] during youth and health.” Instead, the Founders—and Franklin is the greatest example of this effort—encouraged and formed private associations to promote mutual aid and assistance and to do precisely what they thought civil society should do to help those in need.

This understanding of independence and dependence changed radically toward the end of the 19th century with the rise of modern liberalism. Thinkers such as Herbert Croly and John Dewey argued that the forces of industrialism and urbanization had shattered America’s traditional social order and that the conditions of the modern world required a new activist government to better manage political life and human affairs. Beginning with the Progressive Movement and continuing with the New Deal and the Great Society, this liberalism set out to transform the old constitutional structure into a “living” governmental system that was progressive, increasingly centralized, and focused on social reform.

President Franklin D. Roosevelt argued that true independence cannot exist without economic security—“Necessitous men are not free,” he said—and proposed a second bill of rights that included a government guarantee to decent housing, a living wage, adequate health care, a good education, and social security, among other things. By this view, dependence means economic want, and the new primary task of government is to alleviate economic want and protect against economic insecurity.

The Great Society took the argument one step further by asserting that the purpose of government is no longer the securing of rights as much as it is the creation of the political and economic conditions of equality.

The consequence is that the idea of an



independent, self-governing citizenry is replaced by individuals and groups who see the federal government as the guarantor of economic security and the primary provider of social services. Rather than basic or temporary programs, benefits come to be understood as something to which one is entitled.

At some point, as significant numbers of citizens come to look more and more to government for benefits, they come to expect or depend on those benefits. In the worst case, some are largely if not completely dependent on the services and benefits provided by government. At best, regular economic benefits become a real and substantial interest and bias one's opinion in favor of maintaining, if not expanding, those benefits.

At some point, especially as benefits expand beyond primary needs to middle-class entitlements, there could well be a conflict between immediate self-interest and a long-term, common interest that argues against expanded benefits.

What does all of this mean? For one thing, it encourages a politics in which government benefits and programs are seen as payoffs to existing or potential voter groups—a modern-day Tammany Hall method of building political majorities. We might also consider whether, and to what degree, dependence on essentially permanent government programs serves to create a large number of Americans who are “united and actuated by some common impulse of passion, or of interest, adverse to the rights of other citizens, or to the permanent and aggregate interests of the community.” That is the definition of what James Madison in *Federalist* 10 called a faction, and a majority faction is what the American Founders thought to be the greatest threat to republican government.

Widespread dependency also creates the conditions for a greater problem. Dependency, when combined with the egalitarian spirit and regulatory power of the modern state, can lead to what Alexis Tocqueville described as a form of democratic despotism.

In *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville warned that the American future is “an innumerable multitude of men, all equal and alike, incessantly endeavoring to procure the petty and paltry pleasures with which they glut their lives.” Government becomes the parent,

he writes, as “it provides for their security, foresees and supplies their necessities, facilitates their pleasures, manages their principal concerns, directs their industry, regulates the descent of property, and subdivides their inheritances: what remains, but to spare them all the care of thinking and all the trouble of living?”

“Such a power,” Tocqueville concludes, “does not destroy, but it prevents existence; it does not tyrannize, but it compresses, enervates, extinguishes, and stupefies a people, till each nation is reduced to nothing better than a flock of timid and industrious animals, of which the government is the shepherd.”

The American Founders opposed dependency, feared the dominance of a majority faction, and saw the solution in constitutional self-government. They never imagined that a majority faction could be animated by a dependence on big government. For his part, Tocqueville vividly describes what might happen when subservience is combined with the modern administrative state and warns of the dangers of the despotism of dependency.

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