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Why Limit Government?

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The topic for our discussion this afternoon is “Why Limit Government?” I am tempted to give you the shortest speech you ever heard—just two words: “Why not?!” Yet such a flippant comment would persuade no one of anything and win no battles for liberty. Indeed, our movement may be overdue for a refresher on this very important question.

As men and women who want to “limit” government, we sometimes come across to others as naysayers. As someone once said, we do a better job describing Hell than Heaven. Whenever we make the case for limiting government, we ought to use the opportunity to remind others that we are opposed to excessive government because we are *in favor of* some very positive, important things. We want to limit government—ultimately—because we support freedom and the free society.

We want to limit government because we want to maximize opportunity, enterprise and creativity.

We want to limit government because we want to permit individuals to go as far as their talents, ambitions, and industry can take them.

We want to limit government because we want people to dream and to have the room to bring those dreams to fruition—for themselves and their families.

We want to limit government because we want to strengthen the institutions of civil society that tend to shrink as government grows—institutions such as the family, church, synagogue, mosque, community, and the many voluntary associations that Alexis de Toc-

Talking Points

- Government should be limited to certain minimal, but critical, functions in order to maximize opportunity, enterprise, and creativity.
- Limiting government strengthens other institutions: family, church, community, and many other voluntary associations.
- Those seeking to limit government must show how runaway government inflicts real harm on real people; use rhetoric more effectively; invest more in the issues in which small victories really count; and be convinced that they can win.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at:
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queville recognized as the bedrock of American liberty and self-reliance.

We want to limit government because we have learned something from the thousands of years of experience with it; that it ought properly to be confined to certain minimal, but critical, functions and otherwise leave us alone.

Let's not forget that as a movement, we must remain committed to core principles. We can't be like that character, played by Groucho Marx, who declared, "Those are my principles. If you don't like them, I have others!"

The Core "Core" Principles

With regard to government, at the "core" of our core principles are these unassailable truths: *Government has nothing to give anybody except what it first takes from somebody, and a government that is big enough to give you everything you want is big enough to take away everything you've got.*

The older I get, and the more I observe the political process, the more obvious it is that it's no way to run a business—or almost anything else, for that matter. The deficiencies, absurdities, and perverse incentives inherent in the political process are powerful enough to frustrate anyone with the best and most altruistic of intentions. It frequently exalts ignorance and panders to it. A few notable exceptions aside, it tends to attract the most mediocre talent with motives that are questionable at best. Government runs on the political process; hence, all of the problems endemic to politics show up in what government does and doesn't do.

Indeed, the more that the political process steers government into areas beyond its principal mission, the less well it does those few things (like public safety) that we all expect it to do for us.

"Whatever It Has To Be"

Back in 2001, the ninth son of Robert and Ethel Kennedy, Max Kennedy, flirted with the idea of running for political office. A story in the *New York Times Magazine* recounted his ill-fated attempt at a stump speech riddled with trite one-liners like these: "I want to fight for all of you. I'll commit myself heart and soul to be the kind of congressman who cares about you. I'll dedicate myself to fighting for working families to have a fair chance. I make you this one pledge: I will always be there for you."

Kennedy's handler pressed him repeatedly for a "take-away message," something of substance that his audience would remember. "What do you want people to take away from it?" he asked several different ways. The would-be candidate stammered and couldn't think of much other than "I'm a nice guy," until finally he admitted, "I don't know. Whatever it has to be."

Is this man eligible for public office? Certainly, though in this case the subject fizzled out before his campaign was ever lit and he has presumably found useful work elsewhere. Hundreds just like Max Kennedy get elected every year. Yet, would it ever occur to you to put someone who talks this way in charge of your business? Outside of politics, is there any other endeavor in which such nonsense is as epidemic?

The Silly Side of Politics

Welcome to the silly side of politics. It's characterized by no-speak, doublespeak, and stupid-speak: the use of one's tongue, lips, and other speechmaking body parts to sway minds without ever educating them—and to deceive them, if necessary. The serious side of politics comes afterwards when the elected actually do something, even if—as is often the case—it bears little resemblance to what they promised. It's serious business in any case because it's the part where coercion puts flesh on the rhetorical bones. What makes a politician a politician and differentiates politics from all other walks of life is that the politician's words are backed up by his ability to deploy legal force on their behalf.

This is not a trivial point. After all, in the grand scheme of life there are ultimately only two ways to get what you want or to get others that have hired you (or who depend on you) what they want: You can rely on voluntary action (work, production, trade, persuasion, and charity) or you can take it by force.

A Dangerous Servant

No generation ever grasped the meaning of this better than that of America's Founders. It was one of our Founders who declared that "Government is not reason. It is not eloquence. It is force. Like fire, it can be a dangerous servant or a fearful master." In other words, even when government is no larger than what our Founders wanted, if it does its job so well as to be a true "servant," it's still "dangerous."

Indeed, it is on this point that all the difference in the world is made. Things that rely upon the regular affirmation of voluntary consent don't look at all like those that rest upon force. Whereas mutual consent encourages *actual* results and accountability, the political process puts a higher premium on the mere promise or claim of results and the shifting of blame to other parties.

To win or keep your patronage and support, a provider of goods or services must manufacture something of real value. A business that doesn't produce or a charity that doesn't meet a need will quickly disappear. To get your vote, a politician only has to look or sound better than the next one—even if both of them would renege on more pledges than they would keep. In the free marketplace, you almost always get what you pay for and pay for what you get. As a potential customer, you can say “No, thanks” and take a walk. In politics, the connection between what you pay for and what you actually get is problematic at best.

What Is a Vote Worth?

This is another way of asserting that your vote in the marketplace counts for so much more than your vote in the polling booth. Cast your dollars for the washing machine of your choice and that is what you get—nothing more and nothing less. Pull the lever for the politician of your choice and, most of the time (if you're lucky), you will get some of what you do want and much of what you don't. The votes of a special interest lobby may ultimately cancel out yours. As someone much wiser than me once said, “[P]olitics may not be the oldest profession, but the results are often the same.”

These important distinctions between voluntary, civil society and coercion-based government explain why political Max Kennedy-types are the rule rather than the exception. Say little or nothing, or say silly things, or say one thing and do another—and your prospects of success may only be enhanced. When the customers are captives, the seller may just as easily be the one who whispers seductive nonsense in their ears as the one who puts something real on their plates.

Like it or not, people judge private, voluntary activities by a higher standard than they do public political acts. That is all the more reason to keep

politics in a small and isolated corner of our lives. We have many more productive things to tend to.

Recommendations

With an eye toward strengthening our efforts to limit government, let me offer these brief tidbits, each of which is worthy of much greater discussion and many more specific examples than I have time for here:

1. **Our side must work harder to relate to real people.** No green eyeshades, dollars-and-cents-only stuff. We have to show how limiting government actually improves lives. We must put a human face on the issue by not only showing how runaway government inflicts real harm on real people, but also how the free society can produce a more abundant life for all.
2. **Our side must get smarter with our rhetoric.** We should not allow ourselves to get bogged down in debating the fine points of every proposed government expansion. We need to remind people that government, as a share of our personal income, is consuming five or six times what it did a century ago. We should be demanding to know from our Big Government friends why that is not yet enough. We should embarrass them by asking them to publicly reveal how much more they really want, and at what point they will finally acknowledge that what a person earns belongs fundamentally to him, and not to the government.
3. **Our side must be strategic,** investing more in the issues in which small victories can mean a lot. Issues that come to mind are school choice, private retirement accounts, and state government budgets. When we win those battles, we will start to win across a broad front of issues.
4. **Our side must be convinced that it can win.** We must be optimists. Pessimism is not only unwarranted, it is also a self-fulfilling prophecy. If you think the cause is lost, it will be. No one works hard for a cause they think will lose. We need to convince the world that if anything in human affairs is inevitable, it is that humans will be the free beings their Maker intended. It is not inevitable that they will be ruled by know-it-alls. History is on the side of liberty, not statism.

In other words, limiting government is a lofty endeavor. It's good, honest work. It's a powerful message when presented well.

So let's get out there and get it done.

—Lawrence W. Reed is president of the Mackinac Center for Public Policy. These remarks were delivered in Chicago, Illinois, at the 27th annual meeting of The Heritage Foundation's Resource Bank.