



THE GOVERNMENT VS. THE AMERICAN CHARACTER

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Over the past 50 years, the purpose of the American government has undergone a radical transformation. So much so, that even Franklin Roosevelt wouldn't recognize it, let alone Abraham Lincoln or Thomas Jefferson.

Once admired for the minor role it played in citizens' lives, the American government, both federal and state, has become, within living memory, a vast entitlements machine whose primary function is to dispense benefits.

Indeed, federal and state governments now devote more attention and resources to the public transfer of money, goods and services to individual citizens than to anything else.

By 2010 entitlement payments accounted for about two-thirds of all federal spending, with all other responsibilities of the federal government – in other words, all the things government should do – making up barely one-third.

According to the Bureau of Economic Analysis, in 1960 U.S. government transfers to individuals totaled about 24 billion in current dollars. By 2010 that total was almost 100 times larger or \$2.2 trillion. After adjusting for inflation and population growth, that was still an increase of 727%.

What does this all this mean? And what is the consequence?

From the founding of our nation until quite recently, Americans were regarded, both at home and abroad, as exceptional in a number of ways. One of these was their fierce independence, which informed not only the design of the political experiment that is the U.S. Constitution, but also Americans' approach to everyday affairs. Specifically, this meant an affinity for personal enterprise, a horror of dependency and a disdain for anything that smacked of a hand out.

Overcoming this historic cultural resistance to accepting government aid has not been easy. But it has been achieved. Far from being a source of shame, accepting government aid is now considered normal, even desirable.

From cradle to grave, a treasure chest of government-supplied benefits is there for the taking for every American citizen – and exercising one's legal rights to these many gifts is now part of the American way of life.

In addition to this transformation of fundamental American values, as citizens vote to reward themselves ever more lavishly from government coffers, the obvious question arises: who's

going to pay for it?

That's a question politicians always seem to prefer to put off til next year.

Most probably, the burden will fall on the young. They have decades of tax paying ahead of them. But having been raised increasingly on the taker mentality and accustomed to accepting government benefits, it's not clear that the young understand the future they face as the cost of these promises far exceed the nation's provision to pay for them.

Then again, perhaps they will demand reform, and bring us back to an America more committed to personal responsibility and less dependent on government generosity.

The U.S. is a very wealthy society. If it so chooses, it has vast resources to squander. And internationally, the dollar remains the world's most trusted currency.

Such advantages might postpone the day of economic judgment. But it will not postpone the day of reckoning for the American character.

That, unless we decide otherwise, may be sacrificed long before the credibility of the American economy.

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