

The Right's 'Limited Government' Scam

Exclusive: Libertarians and Tea Partiers pretend they are the only Americans who believe in “limited government” as envisioned by the Framers, but that is a false conceit. The real history is that Madison and Washington devised a Constitution with broad powers to promote the “general Welfare,” says Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

A favorite line from the American Right both well-educated libertarians and know-nothing Tea Partiers is that the Founders believed in “limited government” and the United States must return to that constitutional principle. But the argument is both nonsensical and insulting.

Everyone believes in “limited government” unless you’re a totalitarian or a fan of absolute monarchies. Liberals, conservatives, socialists, free-market ideologues and pretty much everyone in between believe in limitations of government power. The point of having a constitution is to set the limits and rules for a government.

That is what the Framers did with the U.S. Constitution in 1787. They set limits, but they also vastly expanded the central government’s powers, a fact that today’s Right doesn’t want to acknowledge.

Indeed, that’s why the Articles of Confederation, the Constitution’s precursor, has disappeared from the typical right-wing recitation of early U.S. history, which starts with the Declaration of Independence in 1776 and jumps to the Constitution in 1787 and the Bill of Rights in 1791. Left out of the chronology is what governed the country from 1777 to 1787, i.e. the Articles of Confederation.

The reason that the Articles of Confederation are an inconvenient truth for the Right is that the Articles represented what the Right pretends the Constitution stands for now, strong states’ rights and a weak federal government. The Articles even made the 13 states “sovereign” and “independent” and left the central authority as only a “league of friendship” dependent on the states.

However, under that structure, the young nation was coming apart as states went off in their own directions, the economy struggled and European powers looked to exploit the divisions. Then, in 1786, when a populist uprising known as Shays’ Rebellion rocked western Massachusetts, the federal government lacked the money and means to field a military force to restore order. The revolt was eventually

put down by an army financed by wealthy Bostonians.

George Washington, reflecting on the worsening chaos, wrote in support of a plan by fellow Virginian James Madison to give the federal government control over national commerce, declaring: "We are either a united people, or we are not. If the former, let us, in all matters of a general concern act as a nation, which have national objects to promote, and a national character to support. If we are not, let us no longer act a farce by pretending it to be."

When it became clear that the Articles of Confederation could not be feasibly amended to address the country's problems, Washington and Madison led what amounted to a bloodless coup d'état against the states' "sovereign" powers. This coup was known as the Constitutional Convention. It was conducted in secret in Philadelphia and resulted in the Constitution, which flipped the power relationships between the central government and the states, making federal law supreme and dramatically expanding the powers of the national government.

Today's Right doesn't want to acknowledge this history because it destroys the right-wing narrative by revealing the Framers to be advocates of a strong central government and opponents of states' rights. [For details, see Robert Parry's [*America's Stolen Narrative*](#).]

Still 'Limited Government'

Yet, as broad as the Constitution's federal powers were, the fact that they were spelled out mostly in Article I, Section 8 meant that the Framers were creating a "limited government," i.e. one that had to operate within a prescribed set of rules. Those rules were clarified in greater detail by the Bill of Rights in 1791 and have been updated periodically through various amendments.

So, since pretty much everyone agrees that the Constitution established a "limited government," why does the Right pretend that it's the only political grouping that recognizes this obvious fact? In many cases, liberals are even more ardent in rejecting government intrusion on privacy and other personal liberties than many conservatives are.

It seems the reason that the Right pretends that it alone stands for the Constitution's principle of "limited government" is that this argument exploits the national mythology around the country's founding, at least for the uninformed. The argument also plays to the notion that the federal government's use of its considerable powers, such as citing the Commerce Clause and the 14th Amendment to outlaw racial segregation in the South, has been somehow illegitimate.

Indeed, this current right-wing attack on "federal overreach" has been around

since the 1950s and the civil rights movement, which put an end to Jim Crow laws in the South. The Right's claim is essentially neo-Confederate and harkens back to the South's efforts prior to the Civil War to insist that slave-states had the right to nullify federal laws and ultimately to secede from the Union.

Though the Union was maintained by the Civil War, a neo-Confederate movement pushed back against federal efforts to "reconstruct" the South as a more egalitarian society. The neo-Confederates gained political allies among the new industrial elite in the North, "robber barons" who for their own reasons of self-interest wanted to block federal intervention on behalf of impoverished working men and women.

This alliance against federal activism prevailed though much of the late 19th Century and into the 20th Century but suffered severe setbacks when "free-market capitalism" drove the country into the Great Depression. That led to Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal which imposed tighter regulation on Wall Street financiers and created new protections for the average American, whether in union rights or Social Security. Out of those and other efforts of the federal government grew the Great American Middle Class.

Meanwhile, Southern segregationists also lost out as the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s forced the country to finally confront its racist reality. The federal government, led by liberal Democrats and some liberal Republicans, took action to force integration of schools, restaurants and other public facilities. That intervention provoked a furious counter-reaction from many white Southerners who shifted their allegiance to the Republican Party.

A Revamped Movement

In essence, the old alliance of convenience between Southern segregationists and Wall Street financial interests was rekindled and began building a propaganda infrastructure to persuade other Americans that the federal government was evil and had to be fought.

As part of that propaganda effort, wealthy right-wingers, like the Koch Brothers, invested heavily in think tanks and academic institutions where "scholars" cherry-picked quotes from key Framers, particularly Madison, to distort the history surrounding the Constitution. This false history was then packaged and sold to ill-informed Tea Party types who fancied themselves as channeling the anti-government passions of the Founders.

For instance, one right-wing canard about the Second Amendment is that the Framers wanted an armed citizenry so the people could go to war with the government to protect individual liberties. The reality, of course, was entirely

different. Aristocrats like Madison and Washington wanted armed militias so the government could maintain order in the face of disruptions like Shays' Rebellion as well as to resist Native Americans on the frontiers and to put down slave revolts.

The federal response to the Whiskey Rebellion, which erupted in western Pennsylvania in 1791, revealed this chief idea behind "a well-regulated militia" as cited in the Second Amendment. In 1792, shortly after the Bill of Rights was ratified, Congress passed the Militia Acts requiring all military-age white males to obtain their own muskets and equipment for service in militias.

In 1794, President Washington, who was determined to demonstrate the young government's resolve, led a combined force of state militias against the Whiskey rebels. Their anti-tax revolt soon collapsed and order was restored. In other words, the key purpose of the Second Amendment was to help the government maintain "security," as the Amendment says, not to promote disorder.

But the Right's false narratives are not simply historical fantasies. For the last several decades, they have been powerful political instruments enabling neo-Confederates in the South and Ayn Rand libertarians in the North to redirect the United States onto a path of anti-government fanaticism, a craziness that let Wall Street run wild and has put devastating weapons in the hands of mentally unstable individuals.

This misleading notion that only libertarians and Tea Partiers care about and should be allowed to define how the Framers understood "limited government" has led the nation into George W. Bush's Great Recession and the recent school-shooting tragedy in Newtown, Connecticut.

So, while it's true that the Framers like almost every American then and now believed in "limited government," it's wrong to assume that they were anti-government ideologues who would have stood by and done nothing while six-year-olds were being mass-murdered.

The key Framers the likes of Washington and Madison could best be described as pragmatic nationalists. They wanted a strong central government because one was needed to protect the country's hard-won independence.

Another inconvenient truth that the Right would rather people not recognize is that the Framers included in both the Constitution's Preamble and among the "enumerated powers" of Congress in Article I that a top responsibility of the federal government was to provide for the "general Welfare of the United States."

Investigative reporter Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories for

The Associated Press and Newsweek in the 1980s. You can buy his new book, *America's Stolen Narrative*, either in [print here](#) or as an e-book (from [Amazon](#) and [barnesandnoble.com](#)).
