



# Why the Right Hates Government

*By Robert Parry, May 30, 2013*

One reasonable way of looking at democratic governance is that it carries out the collective will of a society, especially in areas where the private sector can't do the job or needs regulation to prevent it from doing harm. Of course, there are always many variables and points of disagreement, from the need to protect individual rights to the wisdom of each decision.

But something extreme has surfaced in modern American politics: an ideological hatred of government. From the Tea Party to libertarianism, there is a “principled” rejection – at least rhetorically – of almost everything that government does (outside of national security), and those views are no longer simply fringe. By and large, they have been embraced by the national Republican Party.

There has also been an effort to anchor these angry anti-government positions in the traditions of U.S. history. The Tea Party consciously adopted imagery and symbols from the Revolutionary War era to create an illusion that this contempt of government fits with the First Principles. However, this right-wing revision of U.S. history is wildly askew if not upside-down. The framers of the U.S. Constitution, and even many of their “anti-federalist” critics, were not hostile to an American government. They understood the difference between an English monarchy that denied them representation in Parliament and their own Republic.

Indeed, the key framers – James Madison, George Washington and Alexander Hamilton – might be called pragmatic nationalists, eager to use the new Constitution, which centralized power at the national level, to build the young country and protect its fragile independence. While these framers later split over precise applications of the Constitution – Madison opposed Hamilton's national bank, for instance – they accepted the need for a strong and effective federal government, unlike the weak, states' rights-oriented Articles of Confederation.

More generally, the founders recognized the need for order if their experiment in self-governance was to work. Even some of the more radical founders, like Sam Adams, supported the suppression of domestic disorders, such as Shays' Rebellion in Massachusetts and the Whiskey Rebellion in Pennsylvania. Adams' and his cohorts' logic was that an uprising against a distant monarch was one thing, but taking up arms against your own republican government was something else.

But the Tea Partiers are not entirely wrong when they insist that their hatred of “gubmint” has its roots in the founding era. There was an American tradition that involved resisting a strong and effective national government. It was not, however, anchored in the principles of “liberty,” but rather in the practice of slavery.

**Southern Fears:** The battle against the Constitution and later against an energetic federal government — the sort of nation-building especially envisioned by Washington and Hamilton – emanated from the fears

of many Southern plantation owners that eventually the national political system would move to outlaw slavery and thus negate their massive investment in human bondage. Their thinking was that the stronger the federal government became the more likely it would act to impose a national judgment against the South's brutal institution of slavery. So, while the Southern argument was often couched in the rhetoric of liberty, i.e. the rights of states to set their own rules, the underlying point was the maintenance of slavery.

This dollars-and-cents reality was reflected in the debate at Virginia's 1788 convention to ratify the Constitution. Two of Virginia's most noted advocates for "liberty" and "rights" – Patrick Henry and George Mason – tried to rally opposition to the proposed Constitution by stoking the fears of white plantation owners. Historians Andrew Burstein and Nancy Isenberg recount the debate in their 2010 book, *Madison and Jefferson*, noting that the chief argument advanced by Henry and Mason was that "slavery, the source of Virginia's tremendous wealth, lay politically unprotected" and that this danger was exacerbated by the Constitution's granting the president, as commander in chief, the power to "federalize" state militias.

"Mason repeated what he had said during the Constitutional Convention: that the new government failed to provide for 'domestic safety' if there was no explicit protection for Virginians' slave property," Burstein and Isenberg wrote. "Henry called up the by-now-ingrained fear of slave insurrections – the direct result, he believed, of Virginia's loss of authority over its own militia."

Henry floated conspiracy theories about possible subterfuges that the federal government might employ to take away black slaves from white Virginians. Describing this fear-mongering, Burstein and Isenberg wrote:

"Congress, if it wished, could draft every slave into the military and liberate them at the end of their service. If troop quotas were determined by population, and Virginia had over 200,000 slaves, Congress might say: 'Every black man must fight.' For that matter, a northern-controlled Congress might tax slavery out of existence.

"Mason and Henry both ignored the fact that the Constitution protected slavery on the strength of the three-fifths clause, the fugitive slave clause, and the slave trade clause. Their rationale was that none of this mattered if the North should have its way."

Madison, a principal architect of the new governing structure and a slaveowner himself, sought to finesse the Mason/Henry arguments by insisting that "the central government had no power to order emancipation, and that Congress would never 'alienate the affections five-thirteenths of the Union' by stripping southerners of their property. 'Such an idea never entered into any American breast,' he said indignantly, 'nor do I believe it ever will.' ...

"Yet Mason struck a chord in his insistence that northerners could never understand slavery; and Henry roused the crowd with his refusal to trust 'any man on earth' with his rights. Virginians were hearing that their sovereignty was in jeopardy."

**Right to Bear Arms:** Despite the impassioned arguments of Henry and Mason – and after Madison gave assurances that he would propose amendments to address some of these concerns – Virginia's delegates narrowly approved the Constitution on a 89-79 vote.

The key constitutional revision to allay the fears of Southern plantation owners was the Second Amendment, which recognized that "a well-regulated militia [was] necessary to the security of a free State," echoing Mason's language about "domestic safety" as in the protection against slave revolts.

The rest of the Second Amendment – that “the right of the people to keep and bear Arms, shall not be infringed” – was meant by definitions of the day to ensure the right to “bear Arms” as part of a “well-regulated Militia.” Only in modern times has that meaning been distorted – by the American Right – to apply to individual Americans carrying whatever gun they might want.

But the double-talk about the Second Amendment didn’t begin in recent years. It was there from the beginning when the First Congress acted with no apparent sense of irony in using the wording, “a free State,” to actually mean “a slave State.” And, of course, “the right of the people to keep and bear Arms” didn’t apply to black people.

The Second Congress enacted the Militia Acts, which mandated that military-age “white” men must obtain muskets and other supplies to participate in bearing arms for their state militias. Thus, the South was guaranteed its militias for “domestic safety.”

Yet, the South still faced the broader political imperative of constraining the power of the federal government so it would never get so strong that it could end slavery. So, during the early decades of the Republic, leading Southern politicians tried to sabotage many of the federal plans for strengthening the United States.

For instance, when James Madison pressed ahead with his long-treasured plan to use the Commerce Clause to justify federal road-building – and thus improve national transportation – he was mocked by Thomas Jefferson for his excessive support of government, as Burstein and Isenberg noted in their book. In the years after the ratification of the Constitution, Madison gradually pulled out of the Washington-Hamilton orbit and was drawn into Jefferson’s. The key gravitational pull on Madison was Jefferson’s opposition to federal initiatives grounded in the agrarian interests of the slave-owning South.

Madison’s realignment with his Virginia neighbor, Jefferson, bitterly disappointed Washington and Hamilton. However, after Jefferson gained the presidency in 1801, he and Madison joined in one of the biggest federal power overreaches in U.S. history by negotiating the purchase of the Louisiana Territory from France – despite the absence of any “enumerated power” in the Constitution that envisioned such an act by the central government.

**March Toward War:** As the national divisions over slavery sharpened, the South escalated its resistance to federal activism, even over non-controversial matters like disaster relief. As University of Virginia historian Brian Balogh noted in his book, *A Government Out of Sight*, Southerners asserted an extreme version of states’ rights in the period from 1840 to 1860 that included preventing aid to disaster victims.

Balogh wrote that the South feared that “extending federal power” – even to help fellow Americans in desperate need – “might establish a precedent for national intervention in the slavery question,” as *Washington Post* columnist E.J. Dionne noted in a May 22 [column](#) [3].

As it turned out, the fears of Patrick Henry, George Mason and like-minded Southerners proved prescient. The federal government would become the enemy of slavery. As the United States grew in economic strength, the barbaric practice became a drag on U.S. global influence.

With the election of Abraham Lincoln from the anti-slavery Republican Party, Southern states saw the writing on the wall. Defense of their beloved institution of owning other human beings required extreme action, which manifested itself in the secession of 11 Southern states and the enactment of a Confederate constitution explicitly enshrining slavery.

The South's defeat in the Civil War forced the Confederate states back into the Union and enabled the Northern states to finally bring an end to slavery. However, the South continued to resist the North's attempts to reconstruct the region in a more race-neutral way. The South's old aristocracy reasserted itself through Ku Klux Klan terror and via political organization within the Democratic Party, reestablishing white supremacy – and oppression of blacks – under the banner of “states’ rights.”

There were, of course, other American power centers opposed to the intrusion of the federal government on behalf of the broader public. For instance, the robber barons of the late 19th and early 20th centuries used their money and their political influence inside the Republican Party to assert laissez-faire economics, all the better to steal the country blind. That power center, however, was shaken by the Wall Street crash of 1929 and the ensuing Great Depression. Recognizing the abject failure of the “free market” to serve the nation's broader interests, the voters elected Franklin Roosevelt who dealt a New Deal that stimulated the economy, imposed securities regulations and took a variety of steps to lift citizens out of poverty.

In the post-World War II era with the United States asserting global leadership, the South's practice of racial segregation became another eyesore that the federal government haltingly began to address under pressure from Martin Luther King Jr. and the civil rights movement. By the 1960s, the South had lost again, with federal laws prohibiting racial segregation.

The momentum from these two government initiatives – intervention to create a more just economy and racial integration – helped build the American middle class and finally fulfilled some of the grand principles of equality and justice espoused at the founding. However, the energy behind those reforms began to fade in the 1970s as right-wing resentment built.

Finally, in the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980, the combined backlash against Roosevelt's New Deal and King's new day prevailed. Too many whites had forgotten the lessons of the Great Depression and had grown angry over what they viewed as “political correctness.”

Over the last several decades, the Right also built an imposing vertically integrated media machine that meshes the written word in newspapers, magazines and books with the spoken (or shouted) word on TV and talk radio. This giant echo chamber, resonating with sophisticated propaganda including revisionist (or neo-Confederate) history, has convinced millions of poorly informed Americans that the framers of the Constitution hated a strong central government and were all for “states’ rights” – when nearly the opposite was true as Madison, Washington and Hamilton rejected the Articles of Confederation and drafted the Constitution to enhance federal power.

Further, the Right's hijacking of Revolutionary War symbols, like yellow “Don't Tread on Me” flags, confuses the Tea Party rank-and-file by equating the founding era's resistance against an overseas monarchy to today's hatred of an elected U.S. government.

Amid this muck of muddled history, the biggest secret withheld from the American people is that today's Right is actually promoting a set of anti-government positions that originally arose to justify and protect the South's institution of slavery. The calls of “liberty” then covered the cries of suffering from human bondage, just as today's shouts of outrage reflect resentment over the first African-American president.