

# 1 Limited versus Active Government in an Uncertain Age

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- The Chapters to Come

On 11 September 2001 what appeared to be a relatively calm period in American history was shattered by the first organized attack on the Continental United States in the modern era.<sup>1</sup> Two of the most potent symbols of American power – the government, in the form of the Pentagon, and corporations in the form of the twin towers – were shown to be vulnerable to a devastating assault by a small group of Muslim fundamentalists. These events have helped to transform both the nature of US domestic politics and the place of the US in the World. Above all they have changed the role of the federal government both in terms of the eyes of American citizens and in the eyes of most foreigners. There is, in fact, a deep paradox here, because for much of the history of the Republic, Americans have been suspicious of big government in terms of its role in domestic affairs and its role in the wider world. Unlike the citizens of most West European states – and indeed of America's immediate neighbours, Mexico and Canada – Americans have always mistrusted the very *idea* of big government. Low taxes and limited public spending have been populist rallying cries since the beginning of the Republic. Today, however, the US has, in absolute terms, by far the largest government of any country on earth, which provides for a vast array of social and economic programmes as well as defence forces and commitments with global reach.

At the inception of the Republic, no question aroused as much passion as did the proper scope of the federal government in society. And what the Founding Fathers decided on was an institutional structure that required the assent of several diverse constituencies (those electing the House and Senate) before a bill was passed. The presidential veto power provided an additional check on government, as did the institution of federalism, which served further to fragment government in the new Republic. These institutional features were both a product of, and reinforced by, a public philosophy of limited government. From the very beginning Americans

accepted that government was a necessary evil and that essential services such as law and order, sanitation and education should be provided by state and local rather than the federal government. The first 10 amendments to the Constitution (the Bill of Rights) provided citizens with legal protection from a potentially intrusive central government. In particular, the First Amendment rights of freedom of speech, assembly and religion were designed to act as bulwarks against the power of the state. Americans also mistrusted standing armies. Instead they placed their faith in a people's militia or, later, in armies and navies which largely would be disbanded once a national emergency had passed.

What is remarkable about the ensuing 150 years of American history is just how powerful an influence this public philosophy was. For it was not until the 1930s and the 1940s that the federal government assumed a permanent and extensive role in social policy and defence. But many Americans remain deeply ambivalent about these new functions. Support for the particular benefits provided by a range of social programmes such as Medicare and social security is high, but antipathy to the general notion of the federal government supporting those in need remains. Politicians from all sides preach the virtues of less government and lower taxes while promising to defend existing programmes. A similar tension exists in a range of conscience issues. Those who want to protect 'family values' are usually opponents of big government, yet the advance of their agenda would require strong government action in such areas as abortion, school prayer and the rights of sexual minorities. Politicians known to be tough on crime support an extension of the powers of government, including those of federal agencies such as the Department of Homeland Security (DHS). But these very same politicians often preach the virtues of limited government.

Nowhere is this tension more obvious than in foreign and defence policy. Public support for a major world role waxes and wanes according to the historical circumstances. It was high during and immediately after the Second World War, but fell dramatically in the aftermath of defeat in Vietnam. Even so, the need to balance the power of the Soviet Union required the Americans to retain large armed forces, including the nuclear deterrent, whether they liked it or not. With the demise of the old Communist enemy most commentators expected the US to take on a different role aimed at least in part towards advancing a humanitarian agenda, as the interventions in Somalia, Bosnia and Kosovo showed. After 9/11 all this was to change. US interventions abroad are now justified as part of the war on terrorism. By definition, this has involved the sort of military role that is associated with big government and strong states. Indeed, to many foreign observers America is now seen as an imperial power. And at home, new battle lines are being drawn between supporters and critics of this new role.

Of course, the balance between limited government and an expanded federal role ebbs and flows as historical events such as recessions and wars change values and interests. But the tension is always there. Since the 1980s this tension has increased. Surveys have shown increasing support for limiting the scope of government and a deepening disillusionment with the institutions of the federal government. At the same time, there is little evidence that, on the whole, the role of the federal government has been reduced. As later chapters show, the percentage of gross domestic product



accounted for by federal spending has declined only slightly in the past 20 years. Defence spending has risen in recent years, as has expenditure on Medicare, social security and other programmes. By 2005 the budget deficit, which had been under control just 5 years earlier, was once again spiralling upwards.

Similarly, there is little evidence that those areas of federal government activity which cannot be easily measured in economic terms, such as regulation and law and order, have been reduced in size and scope, in spite of the prevailing philosophy of limited government.

For an introductory textbook this conflict between a philosophy of limited government and the fact of big government can provide a useful theme for subsequent chapters. It helps international comparison. In few countries is the philosophy of the limited state as well established as in the USA. Lower taxes are not a dominant value in Germany, France, Italy or the UK, for example. As is shown in chapter 2, citizens in these countries will often support parties that openly propose higher taxes to fund social programmes. Moreover, they often see it as a *duty* of the government to provide for the disadvantaged and needy. Such sentiments have been the exception rather than the rule in American history. *American Politics and Society* constantly makes comparisons of this sort, so educating students on the importance of a set of uniquely American beliefs and values.

These values are, of course, articulated in the context of the institutional structure of American politics. And this structure has been the subject of much criticism in recent years. Critiques have been based in part on specific institutional arrangements, and in particular the separation of powers. With one party controlling the presidency and another the Congress, governing has, so the argument runs, become more difficult than in the past. Underpinning this critique is the simple fact that the American public have an unusually high degree of access to their political institutions – whether at the local, state or national levels. Access is facilitated not only by the sheer number and variety of democratically accountable political institutions from local school boards through to the US Congress, but also by the fact that Americans take their First Amendment rights to express their views very seriously. Thus the many points of access for the expression of the democratic will are combined with a high expectation on the part of the public that their demands will be translated into policy.

The great paradox of the American arrangements is, of course, that open and free access to decision-makers does not always translate into the satisfaction of public demands. Often the very institutional complexity of the system cancels out competing demands and leads to incremental rather than radical change. It is this dynamic that explains many of the policy failures of recent years, such as the failure to reform the healthcare system. Institutional arrangements thus facilitate the airing of sometimes-strident public demands while often limiting what governments can actually do.

The tension between public expectations and the philosophy of limited government also helps explain the growing social and economic inequality which characterizes American life. In democratic political systems, reductions in inequality occur when, in response to public demands, governments act decisively to transfer resources from advantaged to disadvantaged citizens. At least twice in recent US

history – during the New Deal in the 1930s and the Great Society in the 1960s – just such redistributions occurred. In recent years, however, the fragmentation of public demands into myriad competing claims operating in a complex institutional environment has made it especially hard to build a winning coalition for redistributions. This is especially so when it is remembered that the philosophy of limited government has also been on the ascendant. Hence the persistence of inequalities in such areas as health care and education. In both cases reducing inequalities would require a substantial increase in public spending. Many – perhaps most – citizens agree that worsening inequality needs to be addressed, but building a coalition in the presidency, both houses of Congress and the states in support of the required tax increases has proved difficult if not impossible.

Most recently civil liberties have returned to the centre of the stage with accusations that the execution of the ‘war on terror’ has eroded individual freedoms both at home and abroad. Again these claims get right to the heart of the tension between limited government and the fact of an overweening central state.

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## The Chapters to Come

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The main purpose of this book is to lead the student through the main institutions of American federal government while at all times placing institutions in a broader economic, social and comparative context.

Chapter 2 is devoted to a discussion of the role of beliefs and values in American politics and how these link in to the broader society and economy. As such it places a special emphasis on the remarkable way in which the tension in American political thought between the philosophy of limited government and high public expectations of the democratic process has been accommodated within a uniquely *American* ideology. Chapters 3 to 14 cover the main institutions and processes of American government, with each designed to provide basic information and to discuss the relevance of historical trends as well as the relevance of recent research findings in political science. Special attention is paid to the relationship between, on the one hand, the institutional structure of government and, on the other, the public’s expectations of the performance of politicians and political processes. Chapters 15 to 18 are designed to add substance and perspective to earlier chapters by examining the policy process in four currently crucial areas: the regulation of public morality in such areas as civil rights; social policy; economic policy; and foreign policy. Chapter 19 attempts to assess the performance of American government at century’s end. Through the use of comparisons with other countries, the chapter makes an audit of the political system and provokes students critically to evaluate the government in terms of democratic responsiveness and public accountability. Particular attention is paid to the ways in which the US is now perceived from abroad and whether or not we are entering a new era where America is no longer seen as a force for good in the world.

The general orientation of this and earlier chapters reflects my conviction that the study of political institutions can be productive only when placed in the broader comparative and historical perspective. The alternative is to condemn the reader to

an uninspired descriptive account, which is a fate I would not want to impose on any student of what should be one of the most interesting subjects in social science.

### **NOTE**

- 1 The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on 7 December 1941 was of course an event that changed the course of history. However, Hawaii is distant from the United States and was a territory rather than a state at the time.