

A Flawed and Partial Remedy for the Human Condition

"If men were angels," wrote James Madison in the *Federalist Papers*, "no government would be necessary." Madison understood that the human condition is marked by what theologians call sin. Sin is not simply bad behavior, or evil, but an existential condition in which human beings find themselves unable to realize their highest aspirations and, indeed, are often captive to passions and conceits that thwart those very aspirations.

It is a great misfortune that most Americans lack adequate appreciation for the limits and failings that mark the human condition. In the name of freedom, too many Americans advocate a minimalist approach to government and a maximalist approach to individual liberty. Sometimes this works out well, but often not.

These days we have abundant reason to fear government encroachment upon civil liberties and human rights. But there is also ample reason to fear these same encroachments from large corporations and other private forms of concentrated power. [There is also reason to fear individuals who are lacking in social conscience or self-control, be they batterers, gun addicts, drunken drivers, polluters, or the rare terrorist.]

Laissez-faire ("hands-off") capitalism is typically justified on the assumption that free competition works for the benefit of all, even if individuals and businesses are motivated solely by self-interest. Unfortunately, the "free market" works quite imperfectly, and these days large corporations can so manipulate and dominate their markets that neither the public interest nor the common good is served.

The framers of our Constitution built in checks and balances because they understood that no ruling faction or party can be trusted always to do the right thing. Whatever private interests become entrenched in society, when they gain political advantage, pose a threat to both political and economic freedoms of less powerful entities, including individual citizens. Power does tend to corrupt. A free society must guard vigilantly against all forms of unchecked power.

Government is needed, not merely to provide public goods, but to check the irresponsible exercise of individual freedoms, and to check concentrations of power by corporations and other private entities. And the different branches of government are needed, along with an informed electorate, to keep government responsive and hold each branch in check.

Indiscriminate government bashing disregards unpleasant propensities in the human condition. Left entirely to our own devices, we are inclined to turn most circumstances and opportunities to our own perceived advantage irrespective of the common good.

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