



How Did We Get Here?

The late Alabama governor George Wallace once said, “There’s not a dime’s worth of difference between Republicans and Democrats.” Both Republicans and Democrats agree on taking our money. Where they differ is what to spend it on. A Democrat like Senator Edward Kennedy agrees to take our earnings and give them to cities and poor people. A Republican like Senator Elizabeth Dole agrees to take our earnings and give them to farmers and failing businesses.

Republicans have dominated both houses of Congress since 1995, a year when federal spending was \$1.5 trillion. Less than a decade later federal spending in 2002 was over \$2.1 trillion, a 37 percent increase. Some politicians might argue that the war on terrorism has been responsible for the massive spending increase. That’s nonsense! According to a recent report titled “Most New Spending since 2001 Unrelated to the War on Terrorism” by Brian Riedl, a research fellow at the Heritage Foundation, over half of all new spending since 2001 has been unrelated to defense and the 9/11 attacks. Just from 2001 through 2003, federal spending increased \$296 billion, of which: \$100 billion (34 percent) went to national defense and \$32 billion (11 percent) went to 9/11 costs, such as homeland security, international aid, and rebuilding damage done by the attacks. About \$164 billion (55 percent) went to spending completely

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unrelated to either defense or terrorist attacks. Most of the spending represents government taking the earnings of one American and giving it to another American. Such acts are little more than legalized theft. How did legalized theft become so acceptable, considering that it is not part of our history? Let’s look at some of that history.

In 1794 James Madison, the acknowledged father of our Constitution, wrote disapprovingly of a \$15,000 appropriation for French refugees saying, “I cannot undertake to lay my finger on that article of the Constitution which granted a right to Congress of expending, on objects of benevolence, the money of their constituents.” This vision was restated even more forcefully on the floor of the House of Representatives two years later by William Giles of Virginia, who condemned a relief measure for fire victims. Giles insisted that it was neither the purpose nor the right of Congress to “attend to what generosity and humanity require, but to what the Constitution and their duty require.”

In 1854 President Franklin Pierce vetoed a bill intended to help the mentally ill championed by the renowned nineteenth-century social reformer Dorothea Dix. In the face of scathing criticism, President Pierce said, “I cannot find any authority in the Constitution for public charity.” To approve such spending, he added, “would be contrary to the letter and the spirit of the Constitution and subversive to the whole theory upon which the Union of these States is founded.”

President Grover Cleveland was the king of

the veto. He vetoed literally hundreds of congressional spending bills during his two terms as president in the late 1800s. His reason, as he often said: “I can find no warrant for such an appropriation in the Constitution.”

Many Americans erroneously believe that the Constitution’s “general welfare” clause serves as justification for congressional spending on anything that can muster a majority vote. That surely wasn’t the vision of the Framers. In 1798 Thomas Jefferson wrote: “Congress has not unlimited powers to provide for the general welfare, but only those specifically enumerated.” “Specifically enumerated” referred to the listing of congressional powers found in Article I, Section 8, of the Constitution. James Madison elaborated on this limitation in a letter to James Robertson: “[W]ith respect to the two words ‘general welfare,’ I have always regarded them as qualified by the detail of powers connected with them. To take them in a literal and unlimited sense would be a metamorphosis of the Constitution into a character which there is a host of proofs was not contemplated by its creators.”

Founders’ Nightmare

Thomas Paine said, “Invention is continually exercised to furnish new pretenses for revenue and taxation. It watches prosperity

as its prey and permits none to escape without a tribute.” That observation might be a beginning to understanding today’s level of federal exaction that would have appeared as a nightmare to the nation’s Founders.

It’s tempting to blame politicians for the trashing of the Constitution, but politicians don’t bear anywhere near the bulk of the blame; it’s the American people who are at fault. Politicians are elected to office on the promise that they will deliver to one group of Americans the earnings that belong to another group of Americans or that they will confer a special privilege on one group that will be denied another. A politician who disavows this practice will not be elected, or if elected he will be run out of office.

The reason is simple. If a politician doesn’t use his office to deliver other Americans’ earnings to his constituency, it doesn’t mean his constituency will pay lower federal taxes. It only means another state’s citizens will enjoy the loot. Thus when legalized theft becomes routine, it pays for everyone to participate. Those not participating will end up as losers. While becoming a recipient of stolen property is optimal for the individual, it spells devastation for the nation as a whole.

What liberty-loving people might do about this will be the subject of my next article. □