

The American Revolution: An Expression of Libertarianism

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1 Introduction

Historians now recognize that the American Revolution was not solely an ideological event but deeply rooted in the devotion of its leaders and participants to the principles and institutions of libertarianism. The revolutionaries were immersed in a libertarian creed that championed individual rights, self-governance, and economic freedom, inspiring them to resist with unparalleled conviction what they perceived as the systematic encroachments on their liberties by the imperial British government. The rallying cry of “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness,” enshrined in the Declaration of Independence, reflected this profound commitment to a holistic vision of freedom.

For decades, scholars have debated the precise causes of the American Revolution. Were the underlying motivations constitutional, economic, political, or ideological? The consensus now suggests that these categories are inseparable when viewed through the lens of libertarian thought. The revolutionaries believed that civil liberties, moral autonomy, political independence, and economic freedom were interconnected. Far from viewing these domains as distinct or conflicting, they saw them as components of a unified system of natural rights and liberties. This perspective mirrored the ideas of Adam Smith, who described the “obvious and simple system of natural liberty” in *The Wealth of Nations*, published in 1776, the same year as the Declaration of Independence.

The British government’s policies, such as the imposition of taxes without representation, restrictions on trade, and the quartering of troops in colonial homes, were seen by the revolutionaries as violations of this system of natural liberty. These policies not only infringed upon their economic freedoms but also challenged their moral and political autonomy. To the revolutionaries, resisting such encroachments was not just a political necessity but a moral imperative. Their libertarian ethos underscored their belief that freedom in all its forms—economic, civil, and political—was a natural right that could not be compromised or surrendered.

The ideological foundation of the American Revolution was deeply influenced by Enlightenment thought, which emphasized reason, individual rights, and skepticism of centralized authority. Thinkers such as John Locke, whose

ideas about natural rights and the social contract were integral to libertarian philosophy, provided the intellectual scaffolding for the revolutionaries' arguments. They believed that the legitimacy of government rested on the consent of the governed and that any government that failed to protect the natural rights of its citizens forfeited its authority. This belief justified their decision to break away from British rule and establish an independent republic.

Economic liberty, a cornerstone of libertarian thought, played a particularly significant role in the revolutionaries' grievances against the British Crown. Policies such as the Navigation Acts, which restricted colonial trade to benefit British merchants, and the Townshend Acts, which imposed duties on essential goods, were perceived as direct attacks on the colonists' economic autonomy. The revolutionaries viewed these policies not merely as economic burdens but as violations of their natural right to freely trade and produce. For them, economic freedom was inseparable from political and civil liberty, forming an integral part of the broader system of natural rights they sought to defend.

The American Revolution was thus a profound expression of the libertarian creed, a revolt against what the colonists saw as a systematic assault on their integrated vision of liberty. Their struggle was not merely about achieving independence from British rule but about securing a system of governance that recognized and upheld the interdependence of civil, political, and economic freedoms. This holistic approach to liberty distinguished the American Revolution from other movements of its time and laid the foundation for the democratic ideals that continue to shape the United States.

Thus, the American Revolution was a testament to the power of libertarian principles in inspiring collective action and shaping political institutions. By integrating the realms of moral autonomy, political independence, and economic freedom, the revolutionaries articulated a vision of liberty that was both comprehensive and transformative. Their legacy endures as a reminder of the profound connections between individual rights and societal progress, affirming that the defense of liberty in all its dimensions is essential to the preservation of democratic governance.

2 The Emergence and Legacy of the Libertarian Creed

The libertarian creed, which emerged from the classical liberal movements of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, represented a radical shift in the political, economic, and social frameworks of Western society. Its origins can be traced to the English Revolution of the seventeenth century, a transformative period that introduced ideas of individual liberty, limited government, and economic freedom. Though the movement achieved only partial success in its birthplace, Great Britain, it set in motion a revolutionary wave that fundamentally reshaped the Western world, ushering in the Industrial Revolution and challenging the entrenched structures of the Old Order.

The Old Order: A System of Control and Privilege

Before the rise of libertarian thought, Western Europe was dominated by an ancien régime that combined feudal traditions with the emergence of absolutist states. This system imposed heavy taxes, restrictive regulations, and monopolistic privileges, all of which stifled economic innovation and individual freedoms. The central state, often allied with privileged merchants and feudal landlords, created a mercantilist framework that benefited a narrow elite while suppressing the broader population.

In this context, the classical liberal movement emerged as a rebellion against the intertwined systems of feudal land monopolies, urban guild restrictions, and central state control. This movement sought to dismantle the web of privileges and establish a system based on individual liberty, free markets, and limited government. The classical liberals envisioned a society where human energy and enterprise could thrive, unencumbered by the oppressive structures of the Old Order.

Libertarian Goals and Principles

The goals of the classical liberal movement extended across multiple dimensions of society. Economically, the movement sought to reduce taxes, eliminate regulations, and free markets from state interference. This would enable entrepreneurs to compete, innovate, and create wealth in ways that benefited all members of society, particularly the mass of consumers. By lifting the controls on land, labor, and capital, the libertarians aimed to unleash the full potential of human productivity.

In the realm of personal freedom, the classical liberals emphasized the importance of civil liberties and protections against government tyranny. They advocated for the separation of church and state, ensuring that religious sects could coexist peacefully without state interference or imposition. This principle of separation extended to other domains as well, including the economy, speech and press, and even military affairs. The overarching goal was to minimize the role of the state in every aspect of life, creating a society where individuals could freely pursue their interests and aspirations.

Peace and Decentralization

The libertarian creed also championed peace as a fundamental principle of foreign policy. The classical liberals opposed the imperialistic and militaristic tendencies of the ancien régime, which had fueled centuries of warfare and territorial expansion. Instead, they called for a policy of peace and free trade, underpinned by voluntary local militias rather than standing armies and navies. This decentralized approach to defense was consistent with their broader vision of a small, limited government.

The idea of decentralization was central to the libertarian vision. By separating the state from various spheres of life, the classical liberals sought to create a society where power was diffused and localized, rather than concentrated in the hands of a central authority. This decentralization allowed for greater individual autonomy and community self-governance, fostering a culture of liberty and mutual cooperation.

The Intellectual Foundations of Libertarianism

The earliest proponents of libertarianism, such as the Levelers during the English Revolution, laid the groundwork for the movement by articulating ideas of natural rights and individual liberty. John Locke, one of the most influential philosophers of the era, expanded on these ideas in his writings. He argued that individuals possess natural rights to life, liberty, and property, and that the primary purpose of government is to protect these rights. Locke's ideas were later enshrined in the Declaration of Independence, which declared that governments derive their just powers from the consent of the governed and must be altered or abolished if they become destructive of individual rights.

While Locke provided the theoretical foundation for libertarianism, other writers translated his ideas into more accessible and practical terms. John Trenchard and Thomas Gordon, authors of *Cato's Letters*, were among the most influential of these writers. Published in the early 1720s, *Cato's Letters* highlighted the perpetual conflict between power and liberty, emphasizing that government inherently tends to encroach upon individual rights. To prevent this, they argued, government power must be kept small and subjected to constant vigilance and skepticism from the public.

The Revolutionary Impact of Libertarianism

The principles of classical liberalism found their most dramatic expression in the American Revolution, where the colonists' devotion to liberty and resistance to British imperialism were rooted in the libertarian creed. The revolutionaries viewed civil and moral liberty, political independence, and economic freedom as inseparable components of a unified system of natural rights. Their struggle for independence was not just a political rebellion but a broader fight to establish a society based on libertarian principles.

The libertarian movement also played a crucial role in the Industrial Revolution, which transformed economic production and social structures across the Western world. By freeing industry and trade from the constraints of state control and guild monopolies, the classical liberals created the conditions for unprecedented innovation and economic growth. This period of rapid industrialization and technological progress was a testament to the transformative power of libertarian ideas.

The Enduring Legacy

The libertarian creed continues to shape modern political and economic thought. Its emphasis on individual liberty, limited government, and free markets remains a cornerstone of democratic governance and capitalist economies. The classical liberals' vision of a society where power is decentralized and individuals are free to pursue their aspirations without interference has inspired generations of thinkers and policymakers.

In conclusion, the libertarian movement of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries represented a profound challenge to the entrenched systems of power and privilege that had dominated Europe for centuries. By advocating for individual liberty, economic freedom, and limited government, the classical liberals laid the foundation for the modern world. Their legacy endures as a powerful reminder of the potential for human creativity and enterprise to flourish in a society based on freedom and mutual respect.

3 The Libertarian Heritage of the American Revolution

The American Revolution stands as a monumental moment in the history of liberty, driven by the radical libertarian ideals that emerged during the Enlightenment and found their most profound expression in the United States. Central to the libertarian creed was the belief that power is inherently corrupt and that it must be checked through institutional limitations and a vigilant citizenry. This ethos permeated the Revolution and influenced the creation of a new government system that institutionalized liberty and equality.

The Nature of Power and Libertarian Resistance

The libertarian warnings against power, as articulated in works such as Cato's Letters by John Trenchard and Thomas Gordon, deeply resonated with the American colonists. These writings highlighted the dangers of unchecked authority, emphasizing that power, by its nature, is ever encroaching. Trenchard and Gordon wrote, "Power encroaches daily upon Liberty, with a Success too evident; and the Balance between them is almost lost." Such sentiments underscored the colonists' fears of British imperial overreach and their determination to resist it. These warnings were reprinted and widely circulated throughout the colonies, helping to cultivate what historian Bernard Bailyn has aptly termed the "transforming radical libertarianism" of the American Revolution.

The colonists did not merely rebel against the world's most powerful empire but sought to create a fundamentally new kind of society. For the first time, a government was hedged with strict constitutional limits, ensuring that power could not grow unchecked. The establishment of written constitutions, bills of rights, and the principle of the separation of church and state reflected this libertarian mistrust of centralized authority.

Institutionalizing Libertarian Principles

The American revolutionaries implemented a series of reforms that enshrined libertarian values. Church and state were rigorously separated, ensuring religious freedom and eliminating the possibility of state-imposed orthodoxy. The remnants of feudalism, such as entail and primogeniture, were abolished. These practices, which had long reinforced aristocratic privilege in Europe, were replaced by laws that promoted equal inheritance and the free transfer of property.

The newly formed federal government under the Articles of Confederation was designed to be weak, with no power to levy taxes directly on citizens. Any extension of its powers required unanimous consent from the states, reflecting the profound distrust of centralized authority that permeated the revolutionaries' thinking. Above all, the military and war-making powers of the government were severely restricted. Standing armies, which had long been associated with tyranny and imperial conquest, were replaced by voluntary militias composed of citizen-soldiers.

The Radical Legacy of the Revolution

Bernard Bailyn has noted that the American Revolution represented the radical realization of libertarian ideals. Unlike in England, where classical lib-

erals struggled against entrenched institutions and often achieved only partial reforms, the American colonists were able to act decisively. The lack of a feudal aristocracy and entrenched ruling caste in America meant that libertarian principles faced fewer obstacles and enjoyed widespread popular support.

In this context, the Revolution was not merely a political event but a transformative moment that reshaped the very fabric of American society. It was, as Bailyn observed, a realization of the eighteenth-century radical libertarian program. Written constitutions, bills of rights, and limitations on executive, legislative, and judicial powers expressed the profound distrust of power that lay at the heart of the American Revolution. These innovations became a permanent legacy, shaping American political culture and providing a model for democratic governance worldwide.

America as the Embodiment of Classical Liberalism

While classical liberal thought began in England, it reached its most consistent and radical development in the United States. The American colonies, free from the feudal structures that dominated Europe, provided fertile ground for the implementation of libertarian principles. The Revolution swept aside British colonial officials and privileged merchants, enabling the creation of a society based on individual liberty, free markets, and limited government.

Unlike the French Revolution, the American Revolution benefited from geographic isolation, which shielded the new nation from counterrevolutionary invasions. This relative security allowed the Americans to focus on implementing their libertarian ideals without the constant threat of foreign intervention. The result was a system of governance that institutionalized liberty and equality to a degree unprecedented in history.

The Enduring Relevance of the Revolution

The American Revolution's legacy is evident in the principles that continue to define modern democratic governance. The emphasis on individual rights, the separation of powers, and the rule of law are all rooted in the radical libertarian ideas of the Revolution. These principles have not only shaped American society but have also served as an inspiration for movements toward liberty and democracy around the world.

Moreover, the Revolution highlighted the interconnectedness of liberty in all its forms—civil, political, and economic. The libertarian belief that these aspects of liberty are inseparable remains a cornerstone of modern political thought. The Revolution demonstrated that a society based on individual freedom and limited government could thrive, providing a powerful counterexample to the centralized, authoritarian regimes that dominated much of the world at the time.

Conclusion

The American Revolution was more than a rebellion against imperial rule; it was a radical experiment in liberty that reshaped the course of history. Grounded in the libertarian creed, the Revolution institutionalized a profound mistrust of power and established a system of governance that prioritized individual rights and limited government. Its achievements, from the separation of church and state to the abolition of feudal privileges, continue to inspire

and guide democratic movements around the world. In its radical commitment to liberty and equality, the American Revolution stands as a testament to the enduring power of the libertarian ideals that gave it life.

4 America's Libertarian Revolution and Its Aftermath

America, more than any other nation, was born out of an explicitly libertarian revolution—a rebellion against empire, taxation, trade monopolies, regulation, militarism, and executive overreach. This revolutionary movement sought to establish governments unprecedented in their limitations on power. The American Revolution represented not just a struggle for independence but a philosophical commitment to liberty, equality, and minimal government interference.

The Revolutionary Spirit

At the heart of the American Revolution lay opposition to the British Empire's mercantilist system, characterized by high taxes, trade restrictions, and monopolistic privileges conferred upon favored merchants. The colonists viewed these policies as antithetical to the principles of liberty. Their fight against imperial overreach led to a radical break from traditional governance models, resulting in constitutions and bills of rights that tightly restricted government powers.

However, even as the Revolution unfolded, conservative forces within America sought to retain elements of the British system—albeit under new management. These elites, composed of large merchants and planters, envisioned a strong centralized government akin to the imperial model but with American control. These reactionary factions later formed the Federalist Party in the 1790s, advocating policies such as high taxes, a central bank, and regulatory controls, directly opposing the libertarian ethos of the Revolution.

The Jeffersonian and Jacksonian Movements

Despite the Federalist push for centralization, the libertarian momentum persisted into the 19th century through the Jeffersonian and Jacksonian movements. The Jeffersonian Democrats explicitly sought to eliminate the government's role in American life, aspiring to create a government that barely existed. Their vision included:

- No Standing Army or Navy: Rejecting the militarism of European states, Jeffersonians believed in a minimal defensive force.
- Low or Nonexistent Taxes: Federal taxes, excise duties, and tariffs were to be nearly eliminated, creating a negligible government budget.
- Free Banking and Monetary Independence: They opposed central banks and inflationary monetary policies, advocating for free-market banking.
- Nonintervention in Public Works: Jeffersonians resisted using government resources for infrastructure, leaving such projects to private enterprise or state initiatives.

H.L. Mencken's later characterization of ideal governance—a government

that “barely escapes being no government at all”—captured the essence of Jeffersonian thought.

Yet, the Jeffersonian vision encountered obstacles. Jefferson himself made significant compromises, such as the Louisiana Purchase, which, while a monumental achievement, required an unconstitutional expansion of federal power. Additionally, his administration’s drift toward war with Britain in his second term undermined the anti-militarist ethos of the movement. This war effort gave rise to policies—military expenditures, central banking, and federal taxes—that mirrored the Federalist agenda Jeffersonians opposed.

The Rise of Jacksonian Democracy

After witnessing the erosion of Jeffersonian ideals, Jefferson retired to Monticello, where he influenced a new generation of leaders, including Martin Van Buren and Thomas Hart Benton. These leaders aimed to restore and expand upon Jeffersonian principles, forming the Democratic Party with Andrew Jackson as its figurehead. Jacksonian Democracy marked a renewed effort to dismantle centralized power and restore government to its minimal functions.

The Jacksonian plan was ambitious: an eight-year presidency for Jackson, followed by successive administrations under Van Buren and Benton. This plan aimed to institutionalize a government of minimal intervention, retiring public debt, dismantling the central bank, and ensuring the federal government remained separate from the banking system. Jackson fulfilled much of this agenda during his presidency, destroying the Second Bank of the United States and reducing federal debt to unprecedented levels.

Van Buren continued these efforts, further separating government and banking during his presidency. However, the momentum faltered in the 1840 election, where Van Buren was defeated in a highly orchestrated campaign by the Whigs under General William Henry Harrison. This election, marked by modern political tactics like slogans and parades, momentarily derailed the Jacksonian libertarian trajectory. Nevertheless, the Democratic Party remained committed to countering these strategies in the 1844 election, with plans to restore Van Buren and the libertarian agenda.

The Crisis of Slavery

The libertarian aspirations of the Democratic Party were ultimately undone by the issue of slavery. The expansion of slavery into new territories, particularly the admission of Texas as a slave state, caused a profound rift within the party. Van Buren opposed Texas’s admission, while Jackson supported it, symbolizing the sectional divide that would fracture the party and derail its libertarian vision.

Slavery posed a fundamental contradiction to the libertarian principles of liberty and equality that underpinned the Jeffersonian and Jacksonian movements. This “anti-libertarian flaw,” as historian Murray Rothbard described it, ultimately undermined the Democratic Party’s ability to maintain unity and pursue its minimal-government agenda.

A Libertarian Legacy

Despite these challenges, the American Revolution and its libertarian ideals left an enduring legacy. The movement successfully enshrined individual

rights, limited government, and free-market principles in the nation's founding documents. It inspired future generations to resist overreach and advocate for personal freedom, shaping the American political ethos.

The rise and fall of Jeffersonian and Jacksonian Democracy highlight the difficulties of maintaining a libertarian society amid internal divisions and external pressures. While the dream of a government that "barely escapes being no government at all" may have faltered, the principles of liberty and limited government remain central to the American identity.

5 The American Revolution led to the creation of governments that imposed unprecedented restrictions on their own power. These restrictions reflected the revolutionaries' profound distrust of centralized authority, a sentiment born from their experience under British imperial rule. Yet, even as liberalism surged, certain powerful elite groups sought to preserve elements of the old British mercantilist system.

Resistance to Full Liberalism: The Emergence of Conservative Forces

Despite the Revolution's radical libertarian ideals, elite forces among merchants and planters sought to retain aspects of the British system, including high taxes, trade controls, and monopoly privileges granted by the government. These groups supported a strong centralized government akin to Britain's imperial model but restructured to favor American interests. In essence, they wanted the British mercantilist framework without British oversight. These reactionary forces, conservative in their aims, emerged during the Revolution and later coalesced into the Federalist Party in the 1790s.

The Federalists, led by figures like Alexander Hamilton, advocated for policies that included:

1. High Taxes and Tariffs: Designed to protect domestic industries and generate revenue.
2. Centralized Banking: Establishing a national bank to control currency and credit.
3. Strong Federal Authority: Concentrating power at the national level to enforce economic and political policies.

These positions were fundamentally at odds with the libertarian ethos that had driven the Revolution. The Federalist administration's push for centralized control marked an early challenge to the decentralized, limited-government ideals many revolutionaries had envisioned.

The Libertarian Countermovement: Jeffersonian and Jacksonian Democracy

In the face of Federalist centralization, the Jeffersonian and Jacksonian movements emerged as powerful countermovements during the 19th century. These movements, embodied by the Democratic-Republican Party (later the Democratic Party), sought to radically reduce the role of government in American life.

Key Features of the Jeffersonian and Jacksonian Vision

1. No Standing Army or Navy:

- Jeffersonians and Jacksonians opposed the militarism of European states. They believed standing armies and navies were tools of imperial expansion and central control, threatening individual liberties.

- Instead, they advocated for local militias composed of citizen-soldiers who would only mobilize in defense of their homes.

2. Minimal Taxation and Expenditure:

- Taxes were seen as an intrusion on individual liberty. The goal was to eliminate federal taxes, excise duties, and even import tariffs.

- The Jeffersonian ideal was a government that required so little revenue that its budget would be negligible.

3. Free and Unregulated Banking:

- Central banking, as epitomized by the First Bank of the United States, was viewed as an instrument of elite control. Jeffersonians and Jacksonians championed hard money (gold and silver) and opposed inflationary policies.

4. No Public Works or Internal Improvements:

- Large-scale infrastructure projects funded by the government were seen as unnecessary and prone to corruption. They preferred private initiatives to drive economic development.

5. A Hands-Off Approach to the Economy:

- The Jeffersonian and Jacksonian movements rejected government regulation and intervention, believing that free markets were self-regulating and best suited to foster innovation and prosperity.

H.L. Mencken later captured the essence of this vision, describing it as “a government that barely escapes being no government at all.”

Challenges to the Jeffersonian Vision

Despite their commitment to limited government, Jeffersonians faced significant challenges in implementing their ideals:

1. Pragmatic Compromises:

- Jefferson himself made compromises, such as the Louisiana Purchase, which required a dramatic expansion of federal power. While this acquisition was a monumental achievement, it highlighted the tension between ideological purity and practical governance.

2. War and Militarism:

- Jefferson’s administration veered toward war with Britain, culminating in the War of 1812. The conflict necessitated military expenditures and centralized decision-making, undermining the Jeffersonian ideal of minimal government.

3. Economic Realities:

- The growing complexity of the American economy sometimes required coordination and intervention that clashed with libertarian principles.

Jacksonian Democracy: A Renewed Push for Limited Government

Andrew Jackson and his allies sought to revive and expand the Jeffersonian program. Jacksonian Democracy was characterized by:

1. Dismantling the Central Bank:

- Jackson's destruction of the Second Bank of the United States was a landmark victory for libertarian ideals. He viewed the bank as a tool of elite dominance and worked to ensure its demise.

2. Reducing Public Debt:

- Jackson prioritized fiscal responsibility, achieving the rare feat of eliminating the national debt during his presidency.

3. Defending the Common Man:

- Jacksonians positioned themselves as champions of the "common man," opposing policies they perceived as benefiting elites at the expense of ordinary Americans.

Despite these successes, the Jacksonian movement faced its own obstacles. The Democratic Party became increasingly divided over issues like slavery, which ultimately fractured the coalition and limited its ability to fully realize its vision of minimal government.

Legacy of the Libertarian Impulse

The Jeffersonian and Jacksonian movements left a lasting legacy, embedding the ideals of limited government and individual liberty into the American political tradition. Their vision of a decentralized government that refrains from overreach remains a foundational principle for many Americans.

However, their struggles also highlight the challenges of sustaining a purely libertarian system in a complex and evolving society. Internal divisions, external pressures, and the realities of governance often necessitated compromises that diluted their ideals. Nonetheless, the Jeffersonian and Jacksonian eras stand as testaments to the enduring appeal of a government "that barely escapes being no government at all."

6 The Jeffersonian vision of minimal government—one that would nearly eliminate federal control and empower individual liberty—met with significant obstacles after Thomas Jefferson took office. Although Jefferson entered the presidency as a proponent of limited government, his administration faced circumstances that led to compromises with Federalist policies and the eventual divergence from his original ideals.

Challenges to Jeffersonian Libertarianism

1. Concessions to the Federalists

Jefferson's presidency began with a notable compromise, possibly influenced by Federalist support in breaking the tie in the electoral college. These concessions diluted the libertarian ideals he had championed before his presidency. While Jefferson sought to maintain his commitment to limited government, the necessity of political pragmatism began to pull his administration toward centralized policies.

2. The Louisiana Purchase

One of the most significant deviations from Jefferson's philosophy was the Louisiana Purchase in 1803. This acquisition of vast territory was a landmark achievement, doubling the size of the United States and opening opportunities for westward expansion. However, the purchase was constitutionally dubious. Jefferson himself acknowledged its inconsistency with his strict constructionist view of the Constitution. This decision, while pragmatic and beneficial for the nation's growth, marked a turning point where Jefferson placed national interests over libertarian principles.

3. The Drift Toward Militarism

Jefferson's second term saw rising tensions with Britain, culminating in policies that hinted at imperialism. While Jefferson had initially resisted military buildup and entanglements in foreign conflicts, the path toward war with Britain disrupted his plans for a government free of military overreach. The resulting War of 1812, though occurring after Jefferson's presidency, set the stage for a more centralized and militarized federal government.

The Rise of Federalist Statism

These developments paved the way for the resurgence of Federalist ideals, particularly during the War of 1812. During this period, the one-party system under the Democratic-Republicans increasingly adopted elements of the statist Federalist program, including:

- High Military Expenditures: The war effort required extensive resources, undermining the libertarian ideal of minimal government spending.
- Central Banking: The creation and strengthening of a central bank reflected Federalist priorities, contrasting sharply with Jeffersonian opposition to centralized economic control.
- Protective Tariffs and Public Works: Federal infrastructure projects and trade protections signified a shift toward government intervention in economic affairs.

Horried by these outcomes, a retired Jefferson brooded at Monticello. His disillusionment with the direction of the government inspired young leaders like Martin Van Buren and Thomas Hart Benton to reinvigorate the Jeffersonian vision by founding the Democratic Party. Their goal was to dismantle the growing centralization and return to the principles of minimal government.

Jacksonian Democracy and the Libertarian Renaissance

The new Democratic Party, under the leadership of Andrew Jackson, sought to revive Jefferson's ideals. Jacksonian Democracy aimed for a government that:

- Dismantled Centralized Economic Power: Jackson famously destroyed the Second Bank of the United States, viewing it as a tool of elite domination.

- **Eliminated Public Debt:** His administration prioritized fiscal responsibility, achieving the rare feat of paying off the national debt.
- **Empowered the Common Man:** The Jacksonians portrayed themselves as defenders of ordinary citizens against powerful elites.

The Jacksonian plan envisioned a sequence of administrations—Jackson, followed by Van Buren, then Benton—to solidify these reforms over 24 years. The goal was to establish a minimal state that adhered to libertarian principles. While Jackson’s eight years achieved significant victories, such as dismantling the central bank and reducing debt, the movement faltered after Van Buren’s defeat in 1840.

Setbacks to the Libertarian Vision

1. Van Buren’s Defeat

Van Buren’s loss in the 1840 election to William Henry Harrison, engineered by Thurlow Weed’s unprecedented campaign tactics, disrupted the Jacksonian momentum. The Whigs’ victory was a setback for the libertarian movement, though it was seen as a temporary anomaly.

2. The Issue of Slavery

The expansion of slavery into new territories fractured the Democratic Party. The split between pro- and anti-slavery factions derailed Van Buren’s return to power in 1844. This sectional rift symbolized the deeper contradictions within the Democratic Party’s libertarian platform, as the institution of slavery was fundamentally incompatible with the ideals of individual liberty.

3. The Civil War and the Rise of Statism

The Civil War brought unprecedented centralization of federal power under the Republican regime. The war effort justified:

- **High Taxes and Tariffs:** The need for revenue expanded the government’s reach.
 - **Conscription and Militarization:** The war effort required a standing army and conscription, eroding libertarian opposition to militarism.
 - **Economic Centralization:** The return of a central bank and the imposition of inflationary paper money marked a stark departure from Jeffersonian ideals.
- Furthermore, the war led to the abolition of states’ rights to secede and diminished state autonomy, further consolidating federal power.

The Post-War Democratic Revival

After the Civil War, the Democratic Party sought to reclaim its libertarian roots. However, the political landscape had changed dramatically. The expanded federal government and the entrenchment of Republican-led statism made the path back to minimal government far more challenging.

Legacy of Jeffersonian Libertarianism

Despite these setbacks, the Jeffersonian tradition of limited government and individual liberty left an enduring legacy. The principles of decentralization, minimal taxation, and personal freedom remain central to American political rhetoric. This deep libertarian tradition, rooted in the Revolution and carried forward by Jefferson and Jackson, continues to influence the American ethos.

Today, the “feisty and individualistic attitude toward government” observed in much of the American population reflects this legacy. While the practical

realization of a minimal state remains elusive, the ideals of liberty and limited government remain foundational to American political thought, offering fertile ground for future resurgences of libertarianism.

7 Alexis de Tocqueville’s analysis of the American Revolution and its aftermath in Democracy in America suggests that while he may not have explicitly labeled it as a triumph of libertarianism or stateless capitalism, his observations align closely with the principles underlying these ideologies. Tocqueville recognized key elements of the American system—its decentralization, individualism, and civic associations—as foundational to the political and economic freedom that defined the young nation. However, his interpretation reflects a more nuanced view that intertwines the spirit of liberty with democratic governance, rather than focusing solely on the economic dimension of stateless capitalism.

Tocqueville’s Observations on Liberty and Individualism

Tocqueville marveled at the way Americans valued individual liberty and their ability to pursue their ambitions without undue interference. He noted the pervasive sense of self-reliance and personal responsibility in American society. This commitment to individual freedom was reflected in the decentralized political structure, the absence of hereditary aristocracy, and the reliance on voluntary associations to address communal needs.

Tocqueville saw this decentralization and liberty as a counterbalance to the potential excesses of centralized authority. While he might not have framed it in libertarian terms, his recognition of the importance of limiting state power and empowering individuals aligns with the core tenets of libertarianism. The American Revolution’s rejection of imperial overreach and its emphasis on self-governance could be seen as embodying libertarian ideals.

Economic Freedom and “Stateless Capitalism”

Tocqueville also observed the economic dynamism of the United States, driven by free enterprise and minimal government interference in markets. Amer-

icans thrived in a system that encouraged entrepreneurship and innovation, characteristics that resonate with the principles of stateless capitalism. The absence of feudal land monopolies and the widespread availability of property ownership further reinforced the economic liberties central to American society.

While Tocqueville did not explicitly use the term “stateless capitalism,” his descriptions of America’s economic practices reflect a society that had minimized the role of the state in economic matters. Americans relied on private initiative and voluntary cooperation to build infrastructure, establish institutions, and address social needs. This decentralized approach to economic activity was a significant departure from the mercantilist systems that dominated Europe.

Civic Associations as a Pillar of Liberty

One of Tocqueville’s most profound insights was his emphasis on the role of civic associations in sustaining American democracy. These associations, formed without state intervention, enabled Americans to cooperate and solve problems collectively. Tocqueville saw these associations as an essential mechanism for protecting liberty and limiting the state’s reach. They exemplify the principle that societal needs can be met through voluntary cooperation rather than through centralized authority.

Limitations of Tocqueville’s Libertarian Perspective

While Tocqueville celebrated the freedoms afforded by America’s system, he did not embrace the idea of a completely stateless society. He acknowledged the necessity of some level of governance to maintain order and protect individual rights. Tocqueville was also cautious about the potential downsides of unbridled individualism, such as social isolation or neglect of communal responsibilities. His emphasis on balancing liberty with equality and his belief in the importance of democratic institutions suggest that he saw the state as playing a role, albeit a limited one, in safeguarding these values.

Conclusion: A Libertarian Triumph?

Tocqueville’s Democracy in America captures many of the elements that define libertarianism and stateless capitalism, particularly in its celebration of decentralization, voluntary association, and individual liberty. However, Tocqueville viewed these features as part of a broader democratic experiment rather than as an end in themselves. While he recognized the revolutionary triumph of liberty and the dismantling of centralized control, his focus remained on the interplay between liberty, equality, and democratic governance. In this sense, Tocqueville’s analysis aligns with libertarian principles but stops short of endorsing a fully stateless capitalist vision. Instead, he presents the American Revolution as a unique synthesis of liberty and democracy, a model for balancing individual freedom with the collective good.

8 Bernard Bailyn has summed up the achievement of the American revolutionaries:

The modernization of American Politics and government during and after the Revolution took the form of a sudden, radical realization of the program that had first been fully set forth by the opposition intelligentsia . . . in the reign of George the First. Where the English opposition, forcing its way against a complacent social and political order, had only striven and dreamed, Americans driven by the same aspirations but living in a society in many ways modern, and now released politically, could suddenly act. Where the English opposition had vainly agitated for partial reforms . . . American leaders moved swiftly and with little social disruption to implement systematically the outermost possibilities of the whole range of radically liberation ideas. In the process they . . . infused into American political culture . . . the major themes of eighteenth-century radical libertarianism brought to realization here. The first is the belief that power is evil, a necessity perhaps but an evil necessity; that it is infinitely corrupting; and that it must be controlled, limited, restricted in every way compatible with a minimum of civil order. Written constitutions; the separation of powers; bills of rights; limitations on executives, on legislatures, and courts; restrictions on the right to coerce and wage war all express the profound distrust of power that lies at the ideological heart of the American Revolution and that has remained with us as a permanent legacy ever after.

References

- [1] Bernard Bailyn, "The Central Themes of the American Revolution: An Interpretation," in S. Kurtz and J. Hutson, eds., *Essays on the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1973), pp. 26–27.