

## The Myth of 'Limited Government'

by [Joseph Sobran](#)

We are taught that the change from monarchy to democracy is progress; that is, a change from servitude to liberty. Yet no monarchy in Western history ever taxed its subjects as heavily as **every** modern democracy taxes its citizens.

But we are taught that this condition is liberty, because "we" are – freely – taxing "ourselves." The individual, as a member of a democracy, is presumed to consent to being taxed and otherwise forced to do countless things he hasn't chosen to do (or forbidden to do things he would prefer not to do).

Whence arises the right of a ruler to compel? This is a tough one, but modern rulers have discovered that a plausible answer can be found in the idea of majority rule. If the people rule themselves by collective decision, they can't complain that the government is oppressing them. This notion is summed up in the magic word "democracy."

It's nonsense. "We" are not doing it to "ourselves." Some people are still ruling other people. "Democracy" is merely the pretext for authorizing this process and legitimizing it in the minds of the ruled. Since outright slavery has been discredited, "democracy" is the only remaining rationale for state compulsion that most people will accept.

Now comes Hans-Hermann Hoppe, of the University of Nevada Las Vegas, to explode the whole idea that there can ever be a just state. And he thinks democracy is worse than many other forms of government. He makes his case in his new book [\*Democracy – The God That Failed: The Economics and Politics of Monarchy, Democracy, and Natural Order\*](#) (Transaction Publishers).

Hoppe is often described as a libertarian, but it might be more accurate to

call him a conservative anarchist. He thinks the state – "a territorial monopoly of compulsion" – is inherently subversive of social health and order, which can thrive only when men are free.

As soon as you grant the state anything, Hoppe argues, you have given it everything. There can be no such thing as "limited government," because there is no way to control an entity that in principle enjoys a monopoly of power (and can simply expand its own power).

We've tried. We adopted a Constitution that authorized the Federal Government to exercise only a few specific powers, reserving all other powers to the states and the people. It didn't work. Over time the government claimed the sole authority to interpret the Constitution, then proceeded to broaden its own powers ad infinitum and to strip the states of their original powers – while claiming that its self-aggrandizement was the fulfillment of the "living" Constitution. So the Constitution has become an instrument of the very power it was intended to limit!

The growth of the Federal Government might have been slowed if the states had retained the power to withdraw from the confederation. But the Civil War established the fatal principle that no state could withdraw, for any reason. So the states and the people lost their ultimate defense against Federal tyranny. (And if they hadn't, there would still have been the problem of the tyranny of individual states.) But today Americans have learned to view the victory of the Union over the states, which meant an enormous increase in the centralization of power, as a triumph of "democracy."

Hoppe goes so far as to say that democracy is positively "immoral," because "it allows for A and B to band together to rip off C." He argues that monarchy is actually preferable, because a king has a personal interest in leaving his kingdom in good condition for his heirs; whereas democratic rulers, holding power only briefly, have an incentive to rob the public while they can, caring little for what comes afterward. (The name "Clinton" may ring a bell here.)

And historically, kings showed no desire to invade family life; but modern democracies want to "protect" children from their parents. By comparison with the rule of our alleged equals, most kings displayed remarkably little ambition for power. And compared with modern war, the wars of kings were mere scuffles.

Democracy has proved only that the best way to gain power over people is to assure the people that they are ruling themselves. Once they believe that, they make wonderfully submissive slaves.

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