

## The Big Picture: Understanding the Proper Role of Government

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As with the United States, modern industrialized democratic nations publicly extoll their “founding values” for all the world to see. These nations declare their core values to include freedom of religion and speech, fairness, justice, opportunity, equality, rule of law, separation of powers, working to advance the general welfare of the entire nation, and more. These countries declare these values are essential to what’s good about those countries. Moreover, they say that these values are essential to uniting the populace in good times and bad.

In the United States, our schools teach basic history and civics so, as a rule, citizens take pride in our nation’s founding documents, which note that it should be self-evident that (1) all human beings are created equal and (2) each of us is endowed with inalienable human rights.

In the U.S., we believe the American Revolution was a natural and inevitable reaction to the way the English Parliament unilaterally dictated the political economy of the colonies. In 1774, the Marquis of Carmarthen asked a rhetorical question in Parliament, *“For what purpose were they suffered to go to that country [the American colonies], unless the profit of their labour should return to their masters here?”*

As a response to English economic and political oppression, our nation’s founders created a government “of the people, by the people, and for the people.” The patriots who fought in the American Revolution had each other’s backs as they worked to create a nation with level playing fields where everyone had a fair shot at achieving the American Dream. The founders wanted to eliminate unfair advantages; to insure that aristocracies of any sort would be unable to dictate unjust government policy, which failed to advance the general welfare of the entire nation.

In the U.S., approximately a century after the nation’s founding during the Gilded Age, another **moneyed aristocracy** took over key decision-making authority in both government and the economy. This was a time when the U.S. was divided into two classes: “Robber Barons” and

“Huddled Masses.” Everyday Americans again instinctively reacted to the abuse of power by an economic elite. In this era, those who sold their intelligence, experience and strength to employers to earn a living were more than half of the workforce. These everyday wage earners saw the inequity of power at the core of the employment relationship and began to expand unionization.

They objected to the political power of the Robber Barons on both major political parties. They were appalled when Mark Hanna, President McKinley’s campaign chairman noted: “There are two things that are important in politics. The first is money and I can't remember what the second one is.”

Those citizens saw civic engagement as a way to resist corporate control of government. Workers and farmers engaged in a political revolution themselves thereby setting the stage for the Progressive Era in U.S. politics.

While the American “creation story” and its core values are used to unite the country, history reveals that their application as reflected in U.S. public policy was flawed. Not surprisingly, Native Americans view the arrival of Columbus as an invasion and the subsequent land grab by colonists and the U.S. government as an invasion. The U.S. Constitution (which replaced the weaker Articles of Confederation) was the result of political compromises. The finished document was flawed. It perpetuated chattel slavery and reserved voting rights for white, male, property owners. Many people, who were subjected to government control (Native Americans, slaves, women, etc.), were initially without a voice in electoral politics.

Americans will often note that their nation’s greatness is found in its ability to change public policy so that the inalienable rights, with which we are all endowed, were extended to marginalized groups who were first denied them. Americans know the journey to fully extending these basic human rights is **unfinished**. Nevertheless, we are getting closer to a nation where the phrase “with liberty and justice for all” is a reality for all Americans.



## Reframing Government

Because any legitimate democratic republic is based on the consent of the governed, our government should be transparent with respect to how it (1) works on behalf of and (2) is accountable to its citizens. Government that fails to act in this way is properly considered illegitimate.

Understood in that light, “all levels of government in our democratic (small “d”) republic have the **moral responsibility** to use our commonwealth in ways that (1) **protect** and (2) **empower ALL** of us EQUALLY.” The nation’s commonwealth is derived from tax revenues as well as our natural and human resources. Governments have a moral obligation to use that commonwealth to fulfill their protection and empowerment mandates. That means that every governmental budget becomes a **moral document**, which can be used to see just how well each governmental agency is fulfilling its mission.

The government **protection function** starts with the military protecting us from enemies foreign and domestic. The protection function extends to the various branches of police and fire service and the criminal and civil court system. We have learned the hard way that government’s protection function needs to be broader than that. It extends to intervening when our economy works in ways that fails to promote the general welfare of the entire nation. That failure happens because unregulated laissez faire capitalism is about maximizing profits and has no room for protecting the public from the excesses of such an economy. As a result, government has an affirmative responsibility to provide protections for consumers, wage earners, investors, pensioners, environmental protection, disaster relief, and safeguarding the integrity of all forms of financial investment.

Government’s **empowerment function** includes the use of public resources on a large scale as investments for human development, civic improvement, and commercial success. Government fulfills this empowerment function by leveling the playing field with public education, physical infrastructure (bridges, roads, public buildings, water and sewer systems); public transit; agricultural assistance; regulation of financial institutions and the stock market; provisions for production and transmission of power (the State of Nebraska benefits from public power); sponsored basic research; a postal service; and more.

This basic definition of the proper role of government in everyday life does a couple of things. First, it turns every governmental budget into a “moral document” that can be reviewed as to whether the resources are available to effectively and efficiently carry out that governmental agencies protection or empowerment function. Second, it gives a way to criticize the contracting out or privatization of protection and empowerment functions. Contracting out and privatization elevate the profit motive above the moral mandate of government. It also removes transparency, which is a hallmark of good government, because private companies make decisions behind closed doors. Finally, it removes accountability because when a business decides to go elsewhere to make money, the government is left holding the bag. Each is bad; together they are a nightmare.

In leveling the playing field and opening more opportunities to all citizens, government policy insures opportunities to help “the least well of among us” become meaningful “contributors” to society. Government plays an important role in helping individuals and businesses grow and prosper. Additionally, government expenditures periodically act as a form of economic stimulus by ramping up its spending in times of economic recession to keep our economy from falling into an economic depression.

Seen this way, it’s fair to say that **without** public contributions, the private sector would fail to prosper. This “frame” is based on the idea that in a modern nation, founded on the core values discussed above, “we all do better, when we **ALL** do better.” For that to happen, government must live up to its responsibility to use its commonwealth (human, natural and economic resources) to protect and empower ALL of us EQUALLY.

Labor unions are the tools wage earners used to protect and empower themselves in determining their future quality of life. This is important because roughly 90 percent of the U.S. workforce sells its intelligence, experience, and strength to employers to earn a living. Unions are the tools that help **all** wage earners gain a **meaningful democratic voice** in the workplace. Wage earners use that collective voice to raise levels of fairness and justice at work and in the community. We had to wait until the 20<sup>th</sup> century for federal law to finally sanction the creation of labor unions and collective bargaining.

In carrying out their essential functions, organized labor is **promoting the general welfare** of the entire nation. Just as in the U.S., the three branches of government create a series of checks and balances; in the workplace, unions establish an important check against the unilateral power of management to decide wages, hours, and terms of employment.

Unions are tools millions of everyday wage earners used to create upward mobility, equal opportunity and economic security in the United States. Unions are properly understood as a “public good” that benefits not just everyone who sells her or his intelligence, experience, and strength to earn a living; **but also benefits the nation’s employers** by insuring that there are consumers of the goods and services, which fill the marketplace.