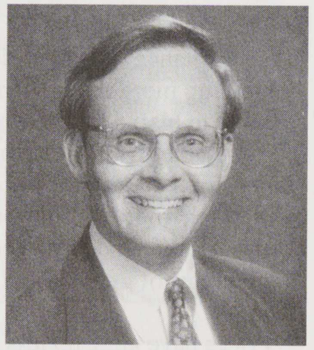
by Lawrence W. Reed



Trust Not in What Your Government Can Do for You

With so much talk these days of scandal, incompetence, and failed programs, trust in government is on the ropes. To some people, this development is lamentable. They are busy writing columns and editorials about the need to "renew our faith in democratic institutions."

But among those who understand the difference between government in the abstract and government in reality—between what America's Founders had in mind and how today's politicians actually behave—declining trust in government evokes a contrasting view: it's richly deserved, long overdue, and we should pray for more of it.

A number of recent polls testify to a fading faith in government. One from the American Enterprise Institute and the Roper Center showed that barely more than 20 percent of Americans "trust government in Washington to do what is right 'most of the time' or 'just about always.'" That's down from about three-quarters of Americans in 1963. (A poll conducted by the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press put the trust figure at 34 percent in February of this year.) A Peter Hart/Robert Teeter survey for the Council on Excellence in Government found that only 8 percent of Americans think the federal government "has enjoyed a large number of successes." The same poll revealed that 47 percent think government "hinders the American Dream."

The National Election Studies (NES) Trust in Government Index tells us that a mere 31 percent of Americans say they trust the government today, about half the 61 percent who said they did in 1966 when the Great Society was getting underway. If only 31 percent had trusted the government then, perhaps we wouldn't have—30 years and endless alphabet programs and agencies later—a $5 trillion national debt with little to show for it but broken families, an eroded currency, and diminished liberties.

To put it bluntly, it's just plain stupid to lament a decline in trust in government until you find out why it's happened. Context is critical here. When the British monarchy was perpetrating "a long train of abuses and usurpations," sending forth "swarms of officers to harass our people and eat out their substance," it was hardly a lamentable fact that American citizens lost faith in King George. They would have had to be deaf, dumb, and generally insensate *not* to lose faith.

America's Founders did not want a government in which the citizens placed blind confidence. Thomas Jefferson was especially noted for his desire to cultivate a healthy distrust of the state. To Abigail Adams in 1787 he wrote, "The spirit of resistance to government is so valuable on certain occasions, that I wish it to be always kept alive. . . . I like a little rebellion now and then. It is like a storm in the atmosphere."

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The steep decline in trust in government since the mid-1960s is proof that large numbers of Americans are awake and learning something. Politicians who promised the sky delivered the proverbial mess of pottage instead. Remember the assurances of how billions of tax dollars siphoned through the federal bureaucracy would solve poverty? The result would be laughable were it not so tragic, so obviously tragic that a president of the same party as Franklin Roosevelt signed a bill in 1996 to end the federal entitlement to public welfare.

If, after the experience of the last 30 years, Americans had lost no faith in government welfare programs, they would likely be diagnosed as possessing a prime symptom of clinical insanity: doing the same harmful thing over and over again and expecting different results each time.

Few if any polls or surveys separate out what people think of the basic, original framework of American *government* from what they think of the characters who are actually doing the *governing*. I suspect that if you asked a cross section of citizens, "Do you trust the concepts embraced by the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution of the United States?" you'd get a higher number than if you asked, "Did you trust Richard Nixon after Watergate?" or "Do you trust Bill Clinton when he says he's faithful to Hillary?"

What's lamentable here is that some of our politicians lie, cheat, and steal. It is *not* lamentable that Americans lose faith in them when they do those things. It is laudable, because it is common sense being appropriately applied.

After all, what does it mean to "trust" someone or something? It means the object of that trust has earned respect and confidence through high standards of reliability, truthfulness, and performance. I can think of no reason why governments deserve your trust any more than anything or anyone else when they fail to meet those standards.

In fact, I can think of a reason why government ought to be held to even higher standards: unlike private individuals or private institutions, it has the legal power to seize your assets whether you trust it or not. If the French political philosopher Pierre-Joseph Proudhon was right (and on this score, I think he was), then it isn't too much for citizens to ask their government to at least be honest with them: "To be governed is to be watched over, inspected, spied on, directed, legislated at, regulated, docketed, indoctrinated, preached at, controlled, assessed, weighed, censored, and ordered about, by men who have neither the right nor the knowledge nor the virtue."

Columnist James Glassman of the American Enterprise Institute, in a February 26 column for the Internet magazine *Intellectual-Capital.com*, sees another kind of good news from the latest spate of trust-in-government numbers. People, he says, are beginning to realize that "their happiness is not dependent on what government does. In fact, they are happy *despite* what government does."

Glassman cites the remarkable results of another poll question: "Which statement comes closer to your view: 'The government is responsible for the well-being of all its citizens and it has an obligation to help people when they are in trouble,' or 'People are responsible for their own well-being, and they have an obligation to take care of themselves when they are in trouble.'" In 1983, 43 percent of respondents replied that the government is responsible and 46 percent said people are responsible. In the 1997 poll, however, the results were 16 percent for government, 66 percent for people.

That shift in the years from 1983 to 1997, says Glassman, "is a refreshing development." Unless you like trillions of dollars of debt or you think the Internal Revenue Service is run by Mother Teresa, you have to agree.

If Americans had really lost all faith in the state, however, they would want to take back the responsibility for their retirement years. They would assume the duty of making sure their children are educated. I haven't seen any polls yet that would suggest a majority of Americans are ready for such rugged individualism. So in some respects we could benefit from even further erosion of "trust in government." □