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## **Honor the Country by Distrusting the Government** **by Sheldon Richman**

President Bush and his supporters base their case for his reelection ultimately on an appeal for trust. Bush asks us to trust that he acted in good faith when he invaded Iraq, even though the intelligence now looks bad. He asks us to trust his strategy for domestic security, even though awesome discretionary power is given to the attorney general. He asks us to trust him when he says government shouldn't run our lives, even though he has presided over a frightening growth in government spending.

The appeal for trust ought to be a hard sell. Weapons of mass destruction have still not been found. Now we learn from the *New York Times* that when the administration warned that Saddam Hussein had aluminum tubes intended for making nuclear materials, its experts were saying those tubes were most likely for something else. When all someone can ask for is trust, that is the time for suspicion.

Bush is not alone in asking for trust. It's the basis of John Kerry's campaign too. Trust him to know how to run the economy, Social Security, Iraq, and nearly everything else. Candidates for office always ask for trust.

This is ironic, however, because trust was not supposed to be the basic American attitude toward government. Distrust is closer to the mark. The United States was founded in revolution against tyranny. The revolutionary generation had felt the brunt of arbitrary power and didn't want the new country to suffer the same curse. Thomas Jefferson, who best captured the spirit of the time, warned against "confidence" in power. He proposed jealousy, that is, vigilance, instead.

For Jefferson and his colleagues, the very point of a constitution is to restrain the government. Why restrain it unless it warrants suspicion? Today political philosophers and others believe that restraining government amounts to restraining "the people." Jefferson knew better — restraining government liberates people. "An elective despotism was not the government we fought for," he wrote.

These days the Constitution is of little more than antiquarian interest. It is invoked far more often than it is observed. Over the decades it has been steadily debased, to the point that,

where it once was a bulwark for liberty against domestic tyranny, it now serves those who want ever more intrusive government and a correspondingly shrunken sphere of liberty. This is best illustrated by Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia's remark after the 9/11 attacks that anyone who opposes a national identification card should get a constitutional amendment passed to stop it because the Bill of Rights contains no prohibition. Earlier generations of Americans would have asked, Where in the enumerated powers of Congress does it say that a national ID is permissible?

We have drifted so far from the original American frame of mind that distrust of government is often interpreted as lack of patriotism, even hatred of one's country. If by "country" we mean its founding principles, namely, the primacy of individual rights, then love of country is perfectly consistent with distrust of government, no matter who's in office. It is not only consistent; it is required. They who proclaim their trust of the administration may be said to have betrayed America's founding vision. Yet it is precisely unquestioning trust that today is equated with patriotism.

Distrust does not mean that political officeholders wish the people ill. The political class may sincerely believe that its schemes are in the everyone's interest. But believing it doesn't make it so. We shouldn't be surprised that the political class believes this. Most people attracted to a life in government think power is superior to consent, contract, and exchange as a way of organizing social life. They enter government because they like its way of doing things. But the essence of government, let us never forget, is the threat of force — violence — not only against those who have initiated its use (criminals), but against the peaceful as well.

That's why government should never be trusted. To honor this country, practice eternal vigilance.

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