"Defender of Liberty"
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The hard part was supposed to be over. The year was 1781, and for our Founding Fathers, the end of the Revolutionary war was in sight. Thirteen separate colonies had come together and fought for six years to free themselves from the British Empire, the greatest naval power in the world. The army of the colonies was not comprised of battle-tested soldiers, but of patriotic men who were ready to control their own destiny. Our soldiers were forced to use guerrilla tactics, suffering from the worst kinds of shortages and diseases on the battlefield winter after winter. And yet, they won. With the entire deck stacked against them in every way possible, they won. After overcoming odds like those, the act of governing would be comparatively easy.

So our Founding Fathers chose to ratify a document crafted during the War called the Articles of Confederation. The Articles sought to maintain the states as the primary location of governance, with little more than loose, intangible bonds stringing them together as a nation. That made a lot of sense at the time. After all, the greatest failure of the British government was that it was a government miles and miles away across the ocean, and so it became detached from the needs of the colonies. Our founders presumed, rightly, that the easiest way to avoid that problem would be to keep the power of government as close to the people as possible.

Yet despite the best intentions of our founders, their approach to self-government was doomed to fail. Time and time again, conflicts arose between the states that the federal government had no power to stop. States issued their own money, causing a general devaluation of all currencies. Overseas, the United States’ ambassadors found themselves representing a disjointed nation that could not guarantee that it would enforce its own treaties. The people were empowered, as well they should have been, but the nation was spiraling into division.

So the dilemma of the Framers in 1787 was this: How were they going to create a strong united republic without sacrificing the liberties so many of their friends and fellow citizens had fought and died for? They could not and would not sacrifice liberty for the sake of order. On the other hand, they had to create a federal central government with real authority, wary as they might be about it. So they did everything they could to empower the people, from direct representation in the legislature to a distinct and independent judicial branch. But one particular break from their British philosophical roots would serve as the guardian for the free America to come: the concept of enumerated powers. Simply put, “enumerated powers” in relation to government means that instead of saying what your government can’t do, you list what it can do and leave everything else off of the table.

Now, this was a huge change in the way people thought about government. In Great Britain, both in the 18th century and today, there is no officially written British Constitution. Rather, its concepts can be changed instantaneously by an act of the legislature. That’s a great idea if your concern is that the government is going to be need protection from the law. But our Founders happened to think that people need protection from their government. By naming the specific powers granted to their new government, they were saying that the legislative branch, the executive branch, and even the judiciary would have clear boundaries that could not be overstepped.

With the memory of King George III still fresh in the minds of the colonists, the last thing those attending the Constitutional Convention wished to do was create a powerful executive to hold up to the nation. Besides the fact that none of them lusted over that sort of
power, it would not do to replace a king with a king. So it was agreed to put clear and obvious limits on the President’s power, and the Constitution does just that. The President may lead as Commander in Chief of the armed forces, make treaties and appointments with consent of the Senate, and veto bills to stop them from becoming law. In Article 1, the President is also given power to veto bills that come before him, to stop them from becoming law. That’s all, and even those powers have restrictions. As we’ve seen, the President’s vetoes may be easily overruled with a simple two-thirds majority vote from the legislature. Our founders made a clean break with the past by deciding that the executive was not to be the focus of the new Union. Instead, true leadership would be invested in the very emblem of a representative democracy, the legislature.

The very first article of the Constitution deals with the federal legislature, laying out the powers of the federal legislature and its restrictions. First and foremost, a very delicate subject for the new union would be the method of taxation. “No taxation without representation” had been a rallying cry for the War of Independence. Thus, our founders wanted to stay as close to that ideal as possible. As we know, the founders had decided on a dual-house legislature, with the upper proportioned by state and the lower proportioned by population. The power of originating taxation bills was vested in the lower house, for two important reasons. For one, the lower house was directly elected by the people, while the upper was elected by their state legislatures. There were virtues to the upper house, to be sure, but it was decided that those who were closest to the people should be the ones closest to their pockets. The other major reason for this placement was the lower house’s quality of representing the number of people in the country, as opposed to just the will of the individual states. If people were to contribute to a whole country, it was reasoned, then they deserved to have their contributions represented properly and equally. Times have changed, and the Senate later became directly elected, but the lower House of Representatives still maintains control of all bills for raising revenue from the citizens.

As for the other powers delegated to our Congress, there is little ambiguity there. As much as the colonists believed in grand ideals, their grand ideals did not include an attempt at a grand utopian state. Many of the enumerated powers dealt with problems that had arisen: The power to coin money, to promote uniform laws on becoming citizens, the power to keep the Army and Navy, and the sole power to declare war. There was no other option; the Founders knew the dangers of vesting the power of a country’s greatest and most human force in one man. They knew of centuries of war in their homelands of Europe, where fifty years of fighting could be set off by a single argument between two monarchs. With respect for the brave men they had fought with just a handful of years before, they trusted that supreme power to declare war with the citizens of their country.

Was their trust well-placed? Were they right in giving us average men and women so much power over our own government? The two greatest dangers in a free and fair democracy are complacency and ignorance. Our country requires citizens to step up to the challenge to defending it as much as it did during the Revolutionary War. As for those citizens who do not actively serve in our armed forces, they have an obligation to those who do. Ensuring that our soldiers have the best equipment possible, providing for their families at home, caring for those who have come back gravely injured…all important and necessary aspects of being a true American citizen. The citizens of the United States also must always be aware of the safeguards and rights explicitly given to them. We must never allow corrupt politicians or revisionist activists to infringe on our rights. If any elected leader moves to in any way usurp power that is
not theirs or ignore the restrictions that preserve the liberty of their citizens, it is our constitutional duty as voters to remove them from their office. For if any official decides to defy the very Constitution that gives him his office that gives his family their freedom that countless numbers of his countrymen have fought and died for—then he does not deserve to hold office in the United States of America. It is not our job to disrespect or disregard our Constitution, our flag, or our rights. Rather, it is our job as citizens to hold our rights and our country close to our hearts, defending them whenever necessary against all enemies.

Those enemies have been numerous, yet the United States of America has stood strong under our Constitution for 250 years. For every one of those 250 years, there have always been doubters. There have always been people who said it couldn’t last. International observers said the United States could not survive the division of the Civil War. They were wrong, and the United States emerged stronger than ever by the turn of the century. During World War II, doomsayers said free nations were too weak and divided to fight the power of fascism and imperialism. They were wrong, and the United States not only defeated the Axis, but turned all three of their enemies into allies. And when the Cold War turned hot, news pundits told us that Communism was an unstoppable force, and that America had finally met its match. They were wrong, and at the end of the day the Berlin Wall came tumbling down and the USSR fell apart with it. The United States has faced down every single challenge it ever faced, and yet even today, you’ll see pundits trying to sell their latest doomsday book. “The Fall of the American Empire”. “Where America Went Wrong”. They would have you believe that the country that defeated fascism and communism can simply not withstand the sheer power of a drop in the stock market or an uptick in immigration. The simple truth is that we will not collapse, because the foundation we have built our government on is too strong to falter. We will remain the greatest nation on earth so long as we remember who we are as a people. We are a people who love our government not because of all the wonderful things it can give us, but because our government, as formed by our Constitution, has been the greatest defender of liberty in the world. That is why we love our government that is why we love our Constitution.