

What would Patrick Henry say?

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BY ANTONY DAVIES & JAMES R. HARRIGAN | Saturday, May 30, 2015, 9:00 p.m.

Patrick Henry, who famously declared, "Give me liberty, or give me death," was born 279 years ago last week. His is perhaps the most well known of all American Revolution slogans, rivaled only by "No taxation without representation!" Taken together, these two rallying cries provide a comprehensive view into the causes of the Revolution. Ever more taxes imposed on colonists with ever less representation in the British government fueled a demand for political liberty that ended, fantastically, with a bunch of farmers overthrowing the greatest military power the world had ever known.

Yet what have we done with our hard-won liberty? In terms of the federal government's economic footprint, this is an easy question to answer. In 1792, 98 percent of spending in the economy was controlled by individuals deciding for themselves whether, when and on

what they would spend their money. Today, individuals control only 65 percent of spending in the economy. Federal, state and local governments dictate the rest. And this ignores the 175,000 pages of federal regulations that control how Americans are allowed to spend their 65 percent. Everything from sleeping (on a government-certified mattress) to brushing teeth (with FDA-regulated toothpaste) to walking on carpeting (that meets Consumer Product Safety Commission standards) to making breakfast (with USDA-approved foods) and coffee (with EPA-regulated water) to driving to work (an activity regulated by at least three federal agencies simultaneously) is now utterly specified by Uncle Sam, your ever-present partner in life.

We still think of ourselves as a young country, but the U.S. Constitution is the oldest written constitution on the planet. Our government has become far more powerful than the British government against which the colonists fought. In 1792, when the American government first became fully functional, it collected the equivalent (in today's dollars) of \$24 per American. That's from all sources combined: income taxes, profits taxes, estate taxes, payroll taxes, fines, fees, tariffs and everything else the government collects. Today, the federal government collects over \$10,000 per person. On a per-person basis and adjusted for inflation, it collects more than 400 times what it did in Patrick Henry's day. On just an inflation-adjusted basis, it collects 35,000 times what it once did. This is the same government that cries poverty every time a tax bill hits the congressional floor.

This ever-growing economic footprint means that the federal government is attempting to do more than it has at any point in our history. And the more government attempts to do, the less freedom individual Americans enjoy.

In 1776, American colonists revolted over taxation without representation. They sought to replace what they considered an arbitrary and overreaching government with one that would instead be well defined and restrained. By the numbers, our federal government today is far less respectful of Americans' liberties than was the British government of Patrick Henry's day. When people can no longer name a single aspect of their lives that is uncontrolled by government, that government has, by definition, become too powerful. By degrees, we have traded our liberties for security and comfort. In asking our government to serve us in ever more ways, we have allowed it to become a monster that enslaves us. It is time to consider seriously Patrick Henry's words, and to admit that, this time around, we have only ourselves to blame.

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