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Last week, in front of a room filled with law enforcement officers, the President of the United States went [off script](#) and encouraged the nation's police officers to abuse criminal suspects under their care. When "you see these thugs being thrown into the back of a paddy wagon" he said, "please don't be too nice." And as if that encouragement to police violence (not to mention racism against the Irish) weren't enough, the President continued, giving more precise advice on how to mistreat human beings. "Like when you guys put somebody in the car and you're protecting their head, you know, the way you put their hand over?... (Y)ou can take the hand away, okay?"

That the President of the United States said these things is deplorable. That the police in attendance laughed and [cheered](#) when he did is inexcusable. But that American citizens did not voice their displeasure immediately and fully in the wake of this shameful event is unfathomable.

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The whole sorry episode points to a reality in American life that no one really wants to talk about: The United States government has become despotic, and the American people have embraced that despotism. Rather than understanding government to be a mechanism to adjudicate competing claims in the name of freedom, people have instead come to see it as the mechanism by which they can inflict their myriad and contradictory social preferences on their fellow citizens.

The people have allowed the United States to become a police state. And this will likely get a lot worse before it gets any better, because the people not only love the chains they wear, they continually ask for more of them in the name of controlling everyone with whom they disagree.

We typically see these matters as partisan squabbles, failing to realize in the bargain that no matter which party wins in the short term, everyone loses over time. This is because not even the most well-designed constitution can maintain a condition of freedom when the people happily empower the government to do ever more.

Democrats ask government to impose their beliefs about what agreements workers and employers may voluntarily make with each other. Republicans ask government to impose their beliefs about what agreements customers and businesses may voluntarily make with each other. Republicans ask government to impose their beliefs about whether people should be allowed to voluntarily ingest recreational drugs. Democrats ask the government to impose their

beliefs about whether people should be allowed to voluntarily ingest sugar. Republicans ask the government to impose their beliefs about which people should be allowed to marry. Democrats ask the government to impose their beliefs about who should be allowed in the military.

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The list seems endless because it is endless. We have come to the point where the average citizen can no longer name a single aspect of American life that remains unregulated.

How bad has it gotten? According to the Institute for Justice, the government takes around [\\$5 billion](#) annually from Americans through asset forfeiture. [Eighty-seven percent](#) of asset forfeitures are civil rather than criminal, meaning in effect that the owners are assumed guilty and must prove they are innocent in order to get their seized money back. By contrast, according to the FBI burglars steal less than [\\$4 billion](#) annually from Americans. The presumption of innocence is effectively gone. Where our property is concerned, we now have more to fear from police than we do from criminals.

The 4th Amendment - specifically written to protect citizens from police intrusion - is effectively gone too. Homeland Security officers are allowed to set up citizenship checkpoints and conduct "routine searches" within up to [100 miles](#) of the U.S. land and coastal boundaries. The ACLU estimates that [200 million people](#) live in this zone. For nearly two-thirds of the American population, the 4th Amendment to the United States Constitution no longer exists.

Everyone who has set foot in an airport over the past decade knows that the TSA routinely heaps extra-constitutional misery on American citizens, and everyone who would prefer not to buy expensive health insurance knows that the Supreme Court has upheld the constitutionality of Congress's demand that every American purchase a product regardless of whether they want to. If a government can do this, what can't it do?

And all of this, and much, much more, is enforced at the point of a gun. Citizens will comply or be jailed. And American citizens are jailed at an astronomical rate. The United States has for years locked up more of its own citizens, both in absolute and per capita terms, than any other country in the world. There are, on any given day, more than [2.3 million Americans](#) behind bars.

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Everywhere one looks, one sees government unconstrained and growing. A cursory glance at the numbers proves the point. The fraction of people employed by government has [grown by half](#) since 1950. And government's reach is expanding too. Over the same period, the number of private sector jobs requiring a government license has grown from [one in twenty](#) to [one in three](#). Meanwhile, total government spending as a fraction of the economy has grown by [50 percent](#). Government is about power, and both the government itself and the amount of power it wields have been growing by every measure for decades.

Sadly, as it has grown, freedom has dissipated. The government is now a blunt force tool used by nearly everyone to control the lives of everyone else. The idea that people should live and let live is as quaint a notion as the one that holds the police should not purposefully harm people under their authority.

Over 200 years ago, James Madison asked, “What is government itself, but the greatest of all reflections of human nature?” The government we have reflects who we are and what we want, nothing more. And we have become despotic. To be anything other, we need to respect the freedom of those who might make choices for themselves with which we don’t agree. And that means being willing to leave peaceful people alone to live their lives as they see fit.

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