

Young Patriots Essay Contest

What should a government provide to its citizens, and why should it do so?

Joshua Mays
First Place

Connor Rohan
Second Place

Helene Cousino
Third Place



NATIONAL CENTER FOR POLICY ANALYSIS

Young Patriots Essay Contest 2011

The central question of government is defining its role. What should a government provide to its citizens, and why should it do so? Students are invited to describe their vision for the world they will one day lead.



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Lancaster, New York
First Place

In recent years, an unsettling number of people have been stronger and stronger proponents of the so-called “nanny state” government: a government empowered to provide for their every need. This misguided desire for more federal intervention in our lives is not only anathema to the constitutional principles upon which our government was founded, it is also dangerous. The government is not our provider — nor should it be. President Gerald Ford said it best when he declared that “a government big enough to give you everything you want is a government big enough to take from you everything you have.” If we cede long-term personal freedoms for short-term and mostly superficial amenities, we put ourselves in grave danger of watching the “nanny state” slowly but surely become an Orwellian Big Brother.

The idea that a provider government could look out for the common good is folly. The American dream has vastly different connotations for the equally vast number of Americans; there is not one America but many. The authors of our founding documents foresaw this diversity and enshrined it in the Declaration; namely, the right of Americans to the *pursuit* of happiness, not a guarantee of happiness itself. Risk-taking and initiative are the hallmark qualities of the American, and a government too bent on centralization denies this critical aspect of American society. Therefore, the only clear choice is of choice itself. Let the American people decide for themselves where they receive health care, where and how they choose to save their money for retirement, and how to provide for themselves so many other services the government has taken upon itself to perform. Freedom is perhaps the word most readily associated with the United States, and individual choice is at the heart of this freedom.

This is not to say that many of the services the government provides or wishes to provide are irrelevant or insignificant; on the contrary, issues

like Social Security, education and health care need to be priorities in the national debate. But because these programs are so essential to so many Americans, why trust their management to an institution that can't even handle its other affairs efficiently? It is a sobering thought that a government nearly \$15 trillion in debt and overseeing myriad broken, incompetent and often downright corrupt bureaucratic misadventures would presume to know how best to manage our personal lives as well. One needs to look no further than any number of failed federal experiments to see the government's unimpressive track record, such as the futile "War on Poverty" (which increased social welfare payments by 400 percent over a period of 12 years — and which saw the poverty level *hold steady* at 13 percent). Needless to say, when competition does not exist, quality plummets. The private sector, the most direct representative of the people, is much more vetted for the process of good quality at a good price. Excluded from the capitalist equalizer, the federal government plunges itself into a downward spiral.

Perhaps the worst aspect of the centralized provider-government model is the myth of no charge. The overbearing and corrupt social programs put in place by a similarly bloated government come at a hefty price tag. With no accountability or fear of competition, the government doesn't have to be concerned with the efficiency of how its — *your* — money is spent. A private company lives constantly with the fear of losing patronage, and as a result it spends its money very carefully, to maximize quality and thus retain customers. A monopolizing federal government, on the other hand, has no fear of losing business — its customers don't have the luxury of choice. Indeed, the advent of private competitors to the United States Postal Service shows clearly the inherent flaws in government-run operations. When given the choice, the people will always choose. The Post Office itself, reacting to this reality, has ironically had to at least partially privatize itself. It would be much to the advantage of the American people and also the federal budget to herald this as the start of a long chain of privatizations. Imagine a Social Security system completely unregulated by government, or a welfare system under the control of religious or other non-profit

organizations. Wasteful spending on the federal and state levels is cut dramatically, and institutions that specialize in such programs will be much better able to handle the task. Meanwhile, the government would be left free to focus solely on its founding mission: to protect and defend the freedom of the American people.

What, then, is the role of government, if not to provide for every facet of the citizen's life? In the simplest terms, the government is defined in the Constitution not as an institution over men but under them, not with broad powers but with defined limitations. The Founding Fathers, victims themselves of a massive imperialist government, recognized the critical necessity of the power being in the hands of the people. For this reason above all others, the government must not take the role of be-all, end-all provider. This awesome responsibility must naturally be in the hands of the people themselves. The government exists only to serve as a framework, a guardian of potential. Far from directing the lives of Americans and guiding them on predetermined tracks of "prosperity," it is the sacred duty of government to merely nurture an environment in which individual Americans can best determine for themselves their paths in life, and where they receive their services. This includes essential services like armed forces, transportation infrastructure, punishment for those who would seek to deprive others of life or freedom, and other such constitutionally valid powers.

But any deviation from this proven and respected model is a threat to the integrity of freedom. Infamous regimes such as Nazi Germany, the USSR, and the British Empire show just how badly off-track even the most well-intentioned governments can go. A chilling extreme, as seen in Orwell's famous novel *1984*, is frighteningly near, in an era witnessing an ever larger encroachment of government into our lives. We must not allow the government to go one step outside of its defined limits, for our own goods. Even seemingly benign or positive social programs, seen in this essay to be in fact defunct and fraudulent, must not be allowed. When we allow the government to provide for all our needs, we may find that it is actually usurping our freedoms.

In these times of uncertainty and worry about our

Young Patriots Essay Contest

financial situations, provisions for our retirement or educational plans, or the availability of basic social programs, we must remain steadfast in our commitment to limited government and the empowerment of the people to provide for the people. The ever-prescient Calvin Coolidge once said of this predicament, “The people cannot look to legislation generally for success. Industry, thrift, character, are not conferred by act or resolve. Government cannot relieve from toil. It can provide no substitute for the rewards of service. It can, of course, care for the defective and recognize distinguished merit. The normal must care for themselves. Self-government means self-support.” We ignore these words at our own peril.

Joshua Mays is a senior at St. Mary's High School in Lancaster, New York.

Connor Rohan Delmar, New York Second Place

Milton Friedman, an American economist, once said that “the proper role of government is to prevent other people from harming an individual. Government... never has any right to interfere with an individual for that individual’s own good.” In this quote, Friedman has successfully outlined the belief that America was founded on: that the role of government in the lives of people should be minimal and should not infringe on their freedoms. For government to be the provider to individuals would guard against the failure of individuals and, in turn, deny them their basic freedoms; the right to succeed is equally as important and valid as the right to fail.

A distinction must be made between what I personally believe to be the two contrasting types of governmental provision, “exclusive” provision and “inclusive” provision. Exclusive provision occurs when governmental assistance is given to a limited segment of the population, individuals and businesses alike (e.g., food stamps, Section 8 housing, and tax breaks or incentives), and inclusive provision occurs when assistance is given to the masses (e.g., education and environmental regulation). These two types of provision will help to define the role of government and its responsibilities.

Exclusive provision, while putting up a facade of economic and social progress, is actually detrimental to society as a whole. A clear example of exclusive provision by the American government would be the welfare system, which involves the redistribution of funds to individuals that the government deems as “needy.” The welfare system currently costs \$682.8 billion yearly and represents over 11 percent of total U.S. governmental spending. Though the cost of the welfare system is astronomical, it is poorly regulated and represents a challenge to the government to control qualification and abuse of the system. The tax money taken from the working class to be redistributed to those on welfare limits the purchasing power of the taxpayers by reducing their net disposable income, thereby limiting their freedom to spend their money as they please. While

the welfare system has arguably helped a number of individuals, the overall impact of the welfare system has, in my estimation, done little more than redistribute money from the hard-working to the less-driven and apathetic. The welfare system is just one of many examples of exclusive provision whereby the government gives certain individuals and businesses assistance and privileges that not everyone qualifies for. This does little more than limit freedoms, promote inequality, and expand the dependence on an overbearing government.

Inclusive provision, on the other hand, benefits society as a whole and allows for economic and social growth. A good example of inclusive provision would be the construction and improvement of infrastructure. The Interstate Highway Act of 1956, signed into law under President Eisenhower, created 90 percent of our highway system and began the mass construction and modernization of American's infrastructure. Despite there being a tax put in place on gas and diesel fuel to pay for the project, the American people were behind it, and it was easily passed in Congress. This act did many great things for the American population — it allowed for the quick mobilization of troops in case of an emergency, it provided for speedy evacuation routes, and it provided to the American citizens the opportunity to travel in an efficient manner. As a result of the Interstate Highway Act of 1956, the economy expanded due to the ease of transportation, and urbanization drastically increased. Jobs were created and the quality of life improved for all American citizens. This one example encompasses the objectives and results of inclusive provision — it benefits society as a whole, improving the lives of all Americans across the board without distinction, and does not infringe upon individual rights.

My ideal government would attempt to maximize the freedoms of its citizens and view itself as an inclusive provider and as a protector. A midsized military would be put in place with emphasis on the National Guard so that citizens could be protected here at home. The National Guard would be deployed only in cases of emergency, such as natural disasters or a crisis of national concern. My government would encourage and fund beautification efforts around the country to improve our

public image and to reduce crime (as studies have shown that crime is reduced with beautification). Projects would be implemented to improve our nation's infrastructure, environment and educational system, so that our nation's highways could be easily navigated, its communities would be clean and its citizens well educated. My government would have a laissez-faire approach to economics for the most part, but would make exceptions, as necessary, to regulate against trusts, monopolies, corporate corruption, and the abuse of employees in order to protect small businesses and the working class. There would be no price floors, no price ceilings, no embargoes, no tariffs and no sin taxes, as the economy is self-regulating and should not be harmed by the decisions and beliefs of politicians. Under my government, all citizens would have the freedom to make their own choices and be expected to deal with the natural consequences. Government's role in the lives of its citizens would be severely limited and, in some aspects, governmental involvement would be completely nonexistent

Government acting as the “provider” would lead to the development of a welfare state and the destruction of the rights of the country's citizens. A libertarian society with the support of inclusive provision and limited governmental interference in the economy is the best case scenario for our government. Under this model of government, individuals would be held responsible for their actions, the economy would grow naturally and everyone would be guaranteed the freedom to do as they please. The role of government in modern times should be restricted; excessive governmental intervention leads to economic and social turmoil. As Thomas Jefferson once said, “The policy of the American government is to leave their citizens free, neither restraining nor aiding them in their pursuits.” This is the best and only way that America can continue to thrive and reclaim its throne as the freest nation in the world.

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Helene Cousino Milton, Vermont Third Place

For the last century, a battle has been fought over the constitutional role of the federal government. What, according to the Constitution, is the government allowed to provide? The general purpose of government is to provide protection to its people. The federal republican form of government in the United States is unique among the nations of the world for the freedom it offers and the justice by which it rules. However, as the federal government takes on the responsibility to provide for its citizens' every need, freedom is forfeited and justice corrupted. Under the Constitution, the government is to provide certain protections; allowing the government to increase those protections increases its power, and is the beginning of tyranny. In the words of President Gerald Ford, "A government big enough to give you everything you want is a government big enough to take from you everything you have."

According to James Madison, the central government had a strictly limited purpose. It was to protect the country from external and internal danger; regulate foreign relations; maintain peace and harmony among the states; rule the territories of the United States; and "guarantee to every state... a republican form of government." In addition to these and a few other minor powers, the Constitution also gave the federal government the authority to do what was "necessary and proper" to carry these powers out. Before the Constitution, the United States had been a confederacy under the Articles of Confederation. Because the central government had no real power, this "firm league of friendship" turned out to be too weak to successfully hold together a nation. When Captain Daniel Shays led a rebellion in Massachusetts in 1786-1787, protesting the many foreclosures in that area, the leaders of the states realized how tenuous the boundary between democracy and anarchy was. They determined to set up a form of government that would unify the states yet preserve the states' authority. At the Constitutional Convention of

1789, 55 men wrote a document unique in the history of the world. Their purpose in writing this constitution is clearly stated in its preamble:

"WE THE PEOPLE of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defence (sic), promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this CONSTITUTION for the United States of America."

This constitution, the supreme law of the land, strictly enumerates all powers of the federal government. The government may only provide what the Constitution allows it to provide. All other provisions are left to the states' governments. Amendment 10 says, "The powers not delegated to the United States by the Constitution, nor prohibited by it to the States, are reserved to the States respectively, or to the people." Thus, most of the responsibility for providing for the people is put on the states, not the central government. However, that is no longer the case.

Today, in the United States, the federal government is the first place people turn to for help. This thinking began during the Great Depression when Franklin D. Roosevelt instituted the New Deal, the first major government welfare program, and continued to become more popular throughout the 1950s-1970s. As the states and their people became increasingly dependent on federal aid, they began to yield more and more of their authority to the central government. However, the price for giving up responsibility is freedom. James Madison wrote, "The accumulation of all powers... in the same hands... may justly be pronounced the very definition of tyranny." As the people of America yield their responsibilities to the central government, the government acquires more power, and the freedoms that thousands of Americans have fought and died for are eroded away. The downfall of America will be the self-indulgence of her citizens. Historian Alexander Fraser Tytler (1747-1813) wrote, "A democracy... can only exist until [a majority of] the voters discovers they can vote themselves largesse from the public treasury. From that moment on the majority always votes for the candidate promising the most benefits from

the public treasury, with the result that a democracy always collapses over loose fiscal policy, always followed by a dictatorship.” In addition, the central government is not the most effective level at which to deal with most of the country’s problems. It is too far from the problem; the solution should be found on the local level, where greater investigation and supervision are possible. W. Cleon Skousen, author of *The 5000 Year Leap: A Miracle That Changed the World*, wrote, “The centralization of political power always destroys liberty by removing the decision-making function from the people on the local level and transferring it to the offices of the central government.” All loyal Americans desire only the best for their country, but the best is not attained without sacrifice. Once the people of America believe they are entitled to the blessings of liberty without the responsibilities that go along with those blessings, their freedom will be taken from them. As Edmund Burke said, “It is ordained in the eternal constitution of things that men of intemperate minds cannot be free; their passions forge their fetters.” Freedom is not a right, but rather a privilege to be valiantly won and vigilantly guarded.

The federal government of the United States was ordained for the specific purposes enumerated in the Constitution; to widen the government’s sphere of influence is to take freedom from the people and bring this nation one step closer to tyranny. Today, the government is larger and more powerful than it was ever intended to be, largely because the people of the United States allowed it to assume the responsibility of providing for them. The only way to ensure that freedom’s torch is not extinguished is to limit the government’s control over the lives of individuals. When Americans take back the responsibilities they relinquished to the government, America will once again be a stronghold of freedom.

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