

THE FIRST LEFTIST



THE FIRST LEFTIST would not be popular in America today. That is true because the original Leftists wanted to *abolish* government controls over industry, trade, and the professions. They wanted wages, prices, and profits to be determined by competition in a free market, and not by government decree. They were pledged to free their economy from government planning, and to remove the government-guaranteed special privileges of guilds, unions, and associations whose members were banded together to use the law to set the price of their labor or capital or product above what it would be in a free market.

The first Leftists were a group of newly elected representatives to the National Constituent Assembly at the beginning of the French Revolution in 1789. They were labeled "Leftists" merely because they happened to sit on the left side in the French Assembly.

The legislators who sat on the right side were referred to as the Party of the Right, or Rightists. The Rightists or "reactionaries" stood for a highly centralized national government, special laws and privileges for unions and various other groups and classes, government economic monopolies in various necessities of life, and government controls over prices, production, and distribution.

EDITOR'S NOTE

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THE IDEALS of the Party of the Left were based largely on the spirit and principles of our own American Constitution. Those first French Leftists stood for individual freedom of choice and personal responsibility for one's own welfare. Their goal was a peaceful and legal limitation of the powers of the central government, a restoration of local self-government, an independent judiciary, and the abolition of special privileges.

Those Leftists, holding a slim majority in the two years' existence of the National Constituent Assembly, did a remarkable job. They limited the extreme powers of the central government. They removed special privileges that the government had granted to various groups and persons. Their idea of personal liberty with absolute equality before the law for all persons was rapidly becoming a reality. But before the program of those first Leftists was completed, a violent minority *from their own ranks* — the revolutionary Jacobins — grasped the power of government and began their reign of terror and tyranny.

That development seems to have risen from this little-understood and dangerously deceptive arrangement: Two groups of persons with entirely different motives may sometimes find themselves allied in what appears to be a common cause. As proof that this danger is not understood even today, we need only examine the results of our own "common cause" alli-

ances with various dictators against various other dictators. So it was among the Leftists in France in 1789. The larger faction wanted to limit the powers of government; the leaders of the other group wanted to overthrow the existing rulers and grasp the power themselves.

SEPARATION OF POWERS

THE MAJORITY of the original Party of the Left had been opposed to concentrated power regardless of who exercised it. But the violent revolutionists in their midst, led by Robespierre, Danton, and Marat, were opposed to concentrated power only so long as someone else exercised it. Robespierre, who represented himself as spokesman for the people, first said that the division of the powers of government was a good thing when it diminished the authority of the king. But when Robespierre himself became the leader, he claimed that the division of the powers of government would be a bad thing now that the power belonged "to the people."

Thus, in the name of the people, the ideas of the original Leftists were rejected. For all practical purposes, local self-government disappeared completely, the independence of the judiciary was destroyed, and the new leaders became supreme. The program of the first Party of the Left was dead.

Most of the original Leftists protested. So they too were soon repudiated in the general terror that was called liberty. But since the

name Leftist had become identified with the struggle of the individual against the tyranny of government, the new tyrants continued to use that good name for their own purposes. This was a complete perversion of its former meaning. Thus was born what should properly be called the *new* and *second* Left.

The leaders of this new Left were greatly aided in their program of deceiving the people by using this effective device of changing the meaning of words. The term "tyranny" had been used to describe the powers of the old government. And the term "liberty" had been used to describe the ideas of the original Leftists. Well and good. But when the second Leftists in turn became tyrannical, they continued to call it liberty! In the name of liberty, mob violence was encouraged, habeas corpus was abolished, and the guillotine was set up!

Now who is opposed to liberty or progress or any of the various other desirable ideals that government officials claim will result from their "unselfish programs for the people"? Probably no one. Thus do the people tend to accept almost any idea — communism, socialism, imperialism, or whatever — if those ideas are advanced under attractive labels such as freedom from want, defense against aggression, welfare, equality, liberty, fellowship, and security. Since most of the world today still suffers from this disease of "word confusion," it is hardly surprising that the French people in the 1790's were also misled by the same device.

THE RALLYING CRY of this new Left was: All power to the people. And, as always, it sounded good to the people. But the point that the French people missed is the same point that haunts the world today. It is this: The people cannot themselves individually exercise the power of government; the power must be held by one or a few persons. Those who hold the power *always* claim that they use it for the people, whether the form of government is a kingdom, a dictatorship, a democracy, or whatever. If the people truly desire to retain or to regain their freedom, their attention should first be directed to the principle of *limiting the power of government itself* instead of merely demanding the right to vote on what party or person is to hold the power. For is the victim of government power any the less deprived of his life, liberty, or property merely because the depriving is done in the name of — or even with the consent of — the majority of the people?

It was on this point that Hitler, for instance, misled the Germans, and Stalin deceived the Russians. Both of them hastened to identify themselves as champions of the people. And there appears to be little or no doubt but that the majority of the people approved or acquiesced in the over-all programs that were initiated in their names.

As the "leaders" murdered millions of individual persons, their excuse for their deeds

was that they were doing them “for the people.”

As they enslaved countless millions of human beings, they brushed all criticism aside by exclaiming: “But the people voted for me in the last election.”

As they confiscated property and income, they claimed to be doing it “for the general welfare” and by “a mandate from the people.”

Hitler and Stalin merely adapted to their time and circumstances the philosophy of the French Jacobins, the new Leftists, who declared that power is always too great in tyrannical hands, but that it can never be too great in the hands of the people — meaning Hitler, Stalin, a Jacobin leader, or any other person who wishes to possess and increase the power of government over the individual citizen.

WHAT IS GOVERNMENT?

HERE is another illogical reason why the people of France traded the freedom-with-responsibility offered by the policy of the first Leftists for the bloody tyranny offered by the policy of the second Leftists: They believed that an organized police force — government — could be used to force people to be good and virtuous.

It is true that this organized force of government can be used, and should be used, to restrain and punish persons who commit evil acts — murder, theft, defamation, and such — against their fellow men; but this force that is

government *cannot* be used to force persons to be good or brave or compassionate or charitable or virtuous in any respect. All virtues must come from within a person; they *cannot* be imposed by force or threats of force. Since that is so, it follows that almost all human relations and institutions should be left completely outside the authority of government, with no government regulation whatever. But this seems to be a difficult idea for most persons to grasp.

The idea of concentrated government power — force against persons — is easy to grasp. And it is easy to imagine that this power can be used to force equality upon unequal persons. Possibly this explains why so many persons believe that the world could be near-perfect if only *they* had the power of government to force other people to do what they think best for them. That concept of government is, however, the direct road to despotism. Any person who holds it is, by definition, a would-be dictator — one who desires to make mankind over in his own image; to force other persons to follow *his* concepts of morality, economics, social relationships, and government. The fact that such would-be dictators may seem to have fine intentions, and wish only to do good for the people, does not justify their arrogant desire to have authority over others.

Thus it was that the terror of the second Leftists reversed the advance of freedom which had begun in France in 1789. And the

French Revolution finally became nothing more than a fight among would-be rulers to gain possession of the power of government.

The new Leftists — as is the case with all persons who desire authority over other persons — did not fear the power of government. They adored it. Like Hitler, Stalin, and other despots, their primary reason for inciting the people to reject the old order was to get this power for themselves. And the people did not object at first because they did not understand that the power of government is dangerous in *any* hands. They just thought that it was dangerous in the hands of a king. So they took the power from the king and transferred it to a “leader.” They failed to see that it was a brutal restoration of the very thing they had rebelled against! In fact, those second Leftists held far more power than Louis XVI ever had.

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Is there a lesson for present-day America to be learned from this French experiment with a highly centralized “people’s government”?

The majority of the American people voted approval of this “Robespierre philosophy of government” as expressed by the holder of a high political office in 1936: “. . . in 34 months we have built up new instruments of public power. In the hands of a people’s government this power is wholesome and proper. But in the hands of political puppets of an economic autocracy, such power would provide shackles for the liberties of the people.”

When translated into simple English, that statement reads: Power is a good thing, so long as I am the one who has it.

That concept of increasing the power of the national government seems to have even more support today, by the leaders of *both* major political parties, than it had in 1936. All of them claim, of course, that they will use the power “for the good of the people.”

SOMETHING FOR NOTHING

HAVE WE FULLY considered where this road may lead? Have we forgotten the teachings of our forefathers and their warning that the only hope for permanent liberty lies in restricting the power of government itself, regardless of who the government officials are or how they may be selected? Have we forgotten their warning to be especially wary of the demagogues who promise us something for nothing?

Our founding fathers, along with the first Leftists who were of the same political faith, were well aware that individual freedom and personal responsibility for one’s own welfare are equal and inseparable parts of the same truth. They knew that history amply supports this truism: When personal responsibility is lost — whether it be taken by force or given up voluntarily — individual freedom does not long endure.