

# Contrasting Ideals and Ends in the American and French Revolutions



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By

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## INTRODUCTION

Even though some politicians and historians in America and Europe have likened the American and French Revolutions to each other, those two landmark events in world history developed differently and ultimately were as dissimilar to one another as the men who forged them. Be that as it may, politicians never miss the occasion to congratulate each other and use photo opportunities to celebrate occasions and events that perhaps should not in plain reality be celebrated with such historical fanfare. The Bicentennial celebration of the French Revolution in the United States was one of such occasions. Consider the following write up:

*Senator Claiborne Pell (D-RI) chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, rose in the United States Senate on May 12, 1988—for himself and Senator Richard Lugar (R-IN)—Senate Resolution 317. “The Resolution I am introducing today urges the people of the United States to observe the bicentennial of the French Revolution and the historic events of 1789, said Pell. “The more we learn about the French Revolution and the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen,” asserted the solon, “the more we learn about our own past.”[1]*

The Resolution was approved by Congress and signed by the president and enacted into law on October 11, 1988. I will leave it to the reader’s discretion to either agree or disagree with the political resolution in the hope that this book—which contrasts the ideals, politics, levels of violence, and ultimate ends and accomplishments of the two revolutions—will help make that determination.

Despite the fact that both the American and French revolutionists were children of the Enlightenment and the Age of Reason and who, at first glance, seemed to be motivated by similar liberal ideals, the two groups differed significantly. The American revolutionaries were nationalist revolutionaries that wanted primarily independence from Great Britain in order to establish a new nation based on certain principles of Natural Rights theory, influenced by men like John Locke (1632–1704) and Baron Montesquieu (1689–1755). The goal of the American patriots was the attainment of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness inherent in the God-given or Nature-derived fundamental rights of men that were not created by government but only protected by a state with a written constitution. The

American revolutionists, therefore, did not seek to overturn the basic institutions of society or turn the world upside down, as eventually the French revolutionists did when they destroyed churches, desecrated tombs, and even renamed the months of the year and created a new revolutionary calendar.[1]

American patriots also instinctively knew, and subsequently affirmed legally, that they wanted to establish a representative form of government—or more specifically, a constitutional republic. The Americans understood that equality of opportunity and equality before the law did not equate to equality of result or outcome. As learned men, they understood human nature and knew that men were different, possessing different aspirations, motivations, and capabilities. Thus, given personal freedom (that is, liberty) and the right to own property, individuals were destined to reach different niches in society. Freedom to pursue occupation, freedom in commerce, and happiness with personal liberty were conducive to peace and prosperity.

On the other hand, in 1789 when the French adopted the revolutionary slogan *Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité* (liberty, equality, and fraternity), they did not grasp the fact that equality of results was incompatible with liberty. And regarding fraternity, they did not mean the brotherhood of *all* men. The nobility was exterminated outright as well as all other purported enemies of the revolution. Insurrectionists who did not serve the purist Jacobin ideology and did not fight with vigor toward that cause were likewise serially liquidated, as we will learn in later chapters.[2]

Edmund Burke (1729–1797), one of the founders of the modern conservative movement[3], was a leading Whig politician and a model classical liberal, who later parted ways with his former Whig liberal confreres, including his longtime friend Charles James Fox (1749–1806), over the radicalism of the French Revolution, which the latter supported.[4] And yet, Burke recognized the differences between the American Revolution and the French Revolution. While condemning the French revolutionist radicals, Burke supported the colonists and American independence. He recognized the difference in the course each revolution was taking. He sided with the Americans. He noted that the ideals and goals of the American Revolution were freedom and independence; for the French, however, they were violence as a means towards an end and the inception of authoritarianism by popular tyranny—despite the French slogan seemingly to the contrary.

There were great differences between the two revolutions, and the similarities as well as those differences will be delineated in this book. In doing so, we will depict some of the most salient and notable historical and

political events in each revolution. Reverberations of those events still affect us today.

Therefore, this book consists of historical, ideological, and political investigations threaded into a series of narratives annotating salient events and notable persons in the two revolutions that not only piqued my interest but also, in my view, deeply affected the world from their time to the present age.

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Milledgeville, Georgia  
October 21, 2024





# **PART I**

## **PRELUDE TO REVOLUTION**

# CHAPTER 1

## THE MORAL PHILOSOPHY OF RESISTANCE TO TYRANNY IN THE JUDEO-CHRISTIAN TRADITION

*The Morality of Self-Defense and Military Action: The Judeo-Christian Tradition* is a well-researched and eloquently written tome. The author, David B. Kopel, is a civil rights attorney and a constitutional law professor, who has successfully achieved what myriad other experts have tried to do but failed because of preconceived notions or biases; selective interpretation of biblical passages or historical events; or political immersion while engaging in theological obscurantism. This is not the case with Kopel's more tolerant approach and scholarly research that leads to the attainment of truth.

Kopel objectively discusses difficult and controversial topics of moral philosophy that spill over into hotter political issues, such as the morality of armed self-defense, the justification for revolutions, resistance to tyranny, and engagement in collective military action (war) as explained by the Judeo-Christian inheritance—a main pillar of Western civilization. These issues are discussed not only succinctly and engagingly but also in a logical and enthralling manner.[1]

The book is divided into two major parts. Part 1 deals with the Old Testament and proceeds chronologically with the history of the Israelites, the problem of violence in the Hebrew Bible, the Prophets, and the Diaspora to the Holocaust to Israel. Part 2 discusses the New Testament, the early Apostles to the Fall of Rome, the Middle Ages, the Reformation, revolutions (including the American Revolution), modern Christianity, the Quakers, and concludes with modern pacifism and its ramifications.

Kopel's research leads him to quote religious and philosophic authorities, such as Saint Augustine of Hippo (AD 354–430), who lived near the time of the fall of Rome; John of Salisbury (1120–1180), the Bishop of Chartres and a leader of the Early Renaissance of the 11th century, a time in which the Church refused to submit to government interference and claimed independence from the state; Saint Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274), the medieval scholastic philosopher; and the more radical Spanish Second Scholastics, including the Spanish Jesuits, Juan de Mariana and Francisco

Súarez, who asserted categorically the right of revolution against tyrannical governments. These writers also wrote that standing armies were inconsistent with free governments, and that citizen militias were essential to protect the Natural Rights of the people and prevent usurpation by kings or elected bodies. These writings percolated from the Catholic world and in time found a home with Protestant leaders ushering in the Reformation.[2]



Figure 1 (left): Saint Augustine of Hippo (AD 354–430), who proposed the initial concept of Just Wars, expounded on by Saint Thomas Aquinas, that is not only permissible action but also a moral duty of good soldiers to preserve benevolent societies and prevent the imposition of evil governments. Tempera on panel by Tomás Giner, 1458. Diocesan Museum of Zaragoza, Aragon, Spain

Figure 2 (right): Saint Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274), who in the 13th century reconciled Aristotelian philosophy with Augustinian theology, employing both reason and faith in the study of moral philosophy and Natural Rights. Tempera on poplar panel by Carlo Crivelli 1476. The National Gallery, London

Catholic teachings embraced Natural Law, affirming the personal right to self-defense, particularly to protect the lives of others, especially the weak and defenseless. Supporting these views about Natural Law were the foremost writers of antiquity—Aristotle (384–322 BC) and Cicero (106–43 BC).[3] Saint Thomas Aquinas reconciled the metaphysics and political writings of Aristotle to Catholic dogma, while Rabbi Moses ben Maimonides

(1153–1204) attempted to do the same for Judaism. The right to self-defense extends from the individual and his household to the community, as to oppose government tyranny; and to nations, as to engage in Just Wars to oppose aggression as long as there is a chance of success, and the number of casualties is limited.[4]

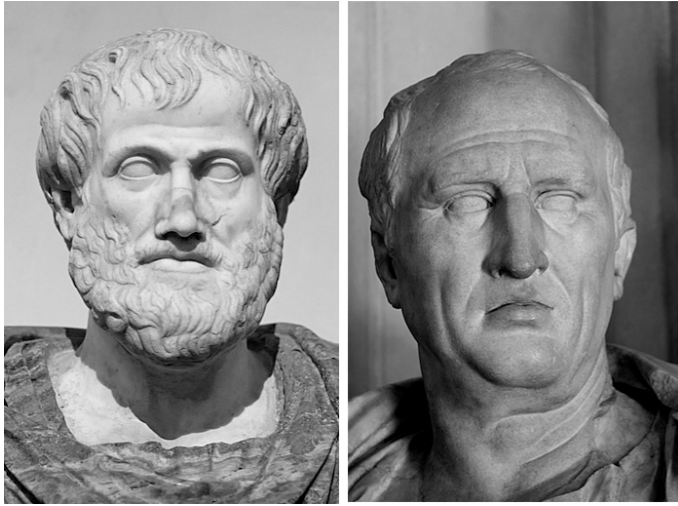


Figure 3 (left): Marble bust of Aristotle (384–322 BC). Roman copy after a Greek bronze original by Lysippos, 330 BC. Ludovisi Collection/Museo Nazionale Romano di Palazzo Altemps, Rome

Figure 4 (right): Bust of Marcus Tullius Cicero (106–43 BC), whose writings expounded on Natural Rights. José Luiz Bernardes Ribeiro/Capitoline Museums, Rome

People, then, have a right to self-defense and a moral duty to defend their families and neighbors, and the community has a right to collective self-defense to curb or prevent tyrannical government. This is supported by biblical scholars[1,5], as well as those who support gun safety courses for home protection.[6,7] Arms are necessary to exercise those rights. And it is for this reason that governments, which tend to be tyrannical, disarm the people. Liberty and the right to preserve life through self-defense are Natural Rights of the people—that is, gifts from God or Nature to man. Governments that attempt to circumvent those Natural Rights are no longer legitimate governments, but usurpations. Bad

governments and usurpations are already in rebellion against God, and therefore, man has a legitimate right to self-defense in the form of insurrection or revolution to overthrow those governments.[8]

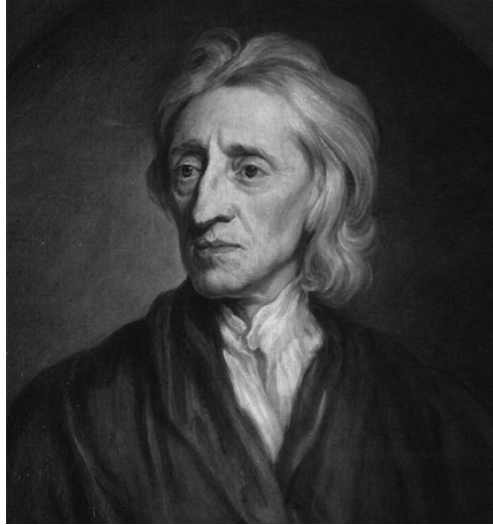


Figure 5: Portrait of John Locke (1632–1704) by Godfrey Kneller, 1697. Locke held that the function of government was to protect the Natural Rights of citizens and that tyrannical governments could be legitimately overthrown. The Hermitage, St. Petersburg

Freedom concepts reached fruition and eloquence in the writings of John Locke, who added that the function of government was to protect the Natural Rights of the citizens and that tyrannical governments could be legitimately overthrown. Protestant leaders, including French theologian John Calvin (1509–1564) and Scottish minister John Knox (c. 1514–1572), believed that the right of violent resistance to governments, which did not follow the precepts of God, was legitimate. However, they imposed the caveat that intermediate magistrates must lead the people since the people themselves do not have that right. Support by the nobility, then, was necessary. But Locke, like Salisbury before him, affirmed that the right of violent resistance was inherent to all citizens; hence, intermediate magistrates were not required.[9]

Kopel correctly pointed out that all the strands of resistance to tyrannical governments and the assertions of Natural Rights theory—individual self-defense and collective right to revolution—united and

reached fruition in the American Declaration of Independence and the Revolutionary War that ended with the founding of the United States and the incorporation of the Bill of Rights in the U.S. Constitution.[10]

The doctrine of Just Revolutions came from both extremes of Christian views—Catholics, as we have seen, and Calvinists, who adopted similar ideals, but not from Lutherans or Anglicans, who were more prone to preserve the status quo of government authority in North Germany and Scandinavia, and in England, respectively.[11]

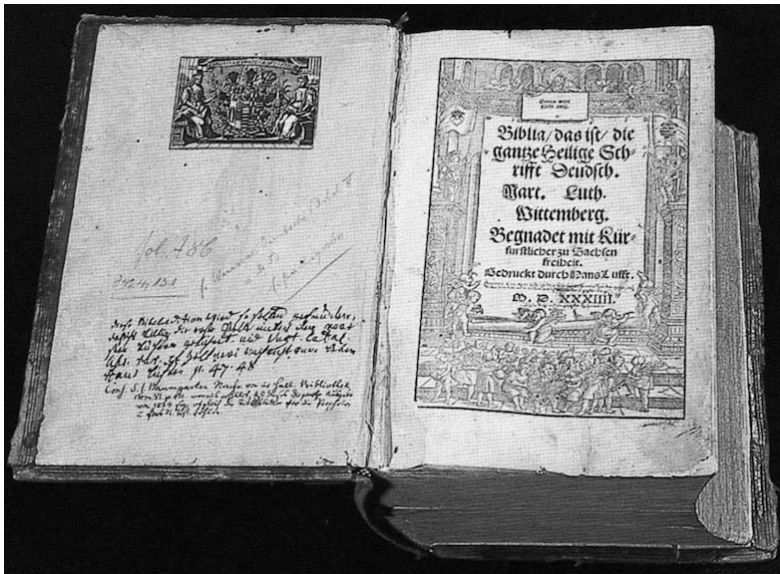


Figure 6: The Luther Bible, 1534. German-language translation of the Bible by Martin Luther, the Protestant reformer influential in the development of Lutheranism, a denomination very respectful of government secular authority. Torsten Schleese/Lutherhaus, Wittenberg

In the United States, the Anglican Church was Loyalist generally, except in the South, while Calvinist sects were pro-revolutionist. The intellectual origins of the American Revolution were said to have been influenced greatly by the ideas of John Locke and the Enlightenment. [10,12] However, they were also heavily influenced by Calvinist ideas coming from New England and distilled from Knox and Presbyterianism stemming from Princeton College under the direction of John Witherspoon (1732–1794).[13,14] Kopel quotes Horace Walpole, the English politician,

addressing Parliament: “There is no use crying about it. Cousin America has run off with a Presbyterian parson and that is the end of it.”[15]

Whig member of Parliament Edmund Burke went further and admonished his fellow Parliamentarians that the Americans were “not of submissive of mind and opinion,” and it would be best not to try to subjugate them.[15] Burke, an intellectual father of modern conservatism, was correct. The Sunday sermons emanating from Protestant American pulpits in the years immediately before 1776 preached the message of rebellion and violent resistance to tyranny and likened the colonists’ quest for American independence to the belligerent Israelites searching for the Promised Land. The Americans would not be subjugated. And on April 19, 1775, the American militia met the British Red Coats at Lexington and Concord and as Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote in his “Concord Hymn”: “The embattled farmers stood and fired the shot heard round the world.”[16]

Kopel’s book is momentous not only because of important theoretical and academic considerations but also for practical and more mundane reasons. For example, many criminals by their actions alone deny that human life is sacred. Therefore, crime is rampant, and terrorists continue to carry out acts of savagery throughout the world. Innocent civilians are victims of mass shootings by deranged killers or terrorist suicide bombings. Christians in particular are subject to selective terrorist attack in foreign lands. And yet, the public is constantly told that citizens should not respond with violence to these frequently deadly and unprovoked attacks. Christian Scripture is often cited as invoking pacifism—for example, Matthew 5:39, which states, “If someone slaps you on the right cheek, offer the other cheek also.”

Kopel does not deny that some biblical evidence can be found to support seemingly contradictory points, but he reminds us that Scripture must be interpreted in its totality. Thus, moral points cannot be made by isolated passages. Kopel wrote: “...attempting to show that much of what the Bible has to say about the legitimacy and illegitimacy of violence can be read in a variety of ways all of which are reasonably good-faith interpretations.”[17]

Conclusions based on the totality of the Scriptures—both in the words and actions of the historic Judeo-Christian religious leaders—can be drawn about the morality of self-defense, participation in Just Wars, and the justification for rebellion and revolution against tyrannical governments. Kopel’s conclusion is that self-defense is not only a personal right but also a moral duty, especially when protecting others, individually or collectively.[1] And as far as, nations and soldiers engaging in a Just War—as initially proposed by Saint Augustine and expounded on by Saint Thomas Aquinas

to thwart aggression and prevent the imposition of evil governments—is not only permissible action but also a moral duty of good soldiers to preserve benevolent societies and eventually bring about lasting peace.[18]



Figure 7: Statue of Moses ben Maimonides (1138–1204), who authored the *Mishneh Torah* and elaborated on the laws of self-defense. Luis Miguel Bugallo Sánchez/Córdoba, Spain

Bolstering Kopel's conclusions is the Judeo-Christian tradition, encompassing the Hebrew Bible, particularly the first five written books called the Torah that discuss Jewish law; the Talmud, the Oral Torah given by Moses to the Israelites and written about 200 BC; and the subsequent rabbinical commentaries of the Middle Ages, particularly the *Mishneh Torah* penned by the medieval scholar and physician Moses ben Maimonides, and other Jewish authorities to the present day. In fact, Maimonides elaborated on the laws of self-defense and affirmed the right not only of the homeowner but also of any other good citizen to kill a



burglar. The book extends the historical-philosophic narrative to the present state of Israel.[19]

For Christians, the Judeo-Christian tradition includes the Old and New Testaments followed by the teachings of the Catholic and Orthodox Churches; the writings of the early Protestant leaders of the Reformation, including Martin Luther, John Calvin and John Knox, to modern Christian writers.[17,20,21] Kopel does not neglect pacifist writers. They have their say too.[22] While their convictions and intentions may be pure and good, their scriptural evidence nonetheless remains tenuous, their logic problematic, and their historical accuracy frequently lacking.

In the modern world, like a good state, which has the right of self-preservation and national security, good citizens of all religious persuasions should have the right to armed self-defense and the moral duty to defend themselves and their families from terrorists, madmen, or tyrannical governments.[1,23-27]

*The Morality of Self-Defense and Military Action: The Judeo-Christian Tradition* is highly recommended for moral philosophers, lawyers, sociologists, criminologists, and all social scientists as well as the general public. The book would be of a more than passing interest to citizens who search for the meaning of liberty or already understand the concept but desire to learn more about the moral right and responsibility required to keep and bear arms for personal as well as collective defense—not to mention to prevent or at least discourage the inception of tyrannical government.

## CHAPTER 2

### THE ENLIGHTENMENT— A TRIUMPH OF CLASSICAL (NOT MODERN) LIBERALISM

The term “liberal” originally stemmed from the human quest for the free inquiry and study of the liberal arts. Aristotle (384–322 BC) explained that the greatest pleasure one could possess was to have the economic means to indulge oneself in the study of nature, books, science, philosophy and the liberal arts, rather than to be forced to labor endlessly with no spare time for leisure and the contemplation of life.

Therefore, a “liberal”—whether a philosopher, teacher, citizen, or politician—referred to a person who engaged in discourse and the free exchange of ideas, tolerance of other points of view (without necessarily approving of those views), personal autonomy, minimalist government with personal liberty, freedom to pursue happiness, health, occupation, and life in general. The ancient form of “liberalism,” which Aristotle referred to, virtually disappeared with the Dark Ages.[1]

#### **The Enlightenment and Classical Liberalism**

The Age of Enlightenment was an intellectual, philosophical, and artistic movement occurring in Western Europe in the late 17th, 18th, and early 19th centuries that valued the pursuit of knowledge and the use of reason in human affairs. It championed the ideals of Natural Law, liberty, constitutional government, and separation of church and state. Unfortunately, it also had some contradicting values. For example, it rejected the Judeo-Christian tradition and transformed the individual into his own god, so in a way, it contravened Natural Rights, which for many intellectuals were inspired by God.

Classical liberals awoke from the slumber of antiquity during the Enlightenment (1685–1815), which was also known as the Age of Reason. They were inspired by the writings of such illustrious philosophers as John Locke (1632–1704); Sir Edward Coke (1552–1634); David Hume (1711–

1776); Adam Smith (1723–1790); essayists Sir Richard Steele (1672–1729) and Joseph Addison (1672–1719); and prominent jurists like Sir William Blackstone (1723–1780) in England, and Joseph Story (1779–1845) in America.



Figure 8 (left): Frontispiece showing an engraved portrait of Sir Edward Coke (1552–1634) at the time of his appointment as Chief Justice of the King’s Bench, c. 1613

Figure 9 (right): Portrait of Sir William Blackstone (1723–1780) after his appointment as Justice of the King’s Bench, painted by Thomas Gainsborough, 1774. Tate Britain

Classical liberalism reached a climax of political influence in 18th and 19th century Great Britain with the ascendancy of Members of Parliament (MPs) Edmund Burke (1729–1797), Charles James Fox (1749–1806) and William Gladstone (1809–1898), who subsequently served as British Prime Minister.

And across the English Channel in France, classical liberalism reached a climax of political influence with such leading physiocrats as A.R.J. Turgot (1727–1781) and Marquis de Condorcet (1743–1794), and the intellectual giants Baron de Montesquieu (1689–1755) and Frederic Bastiat (1801–1850).

Fortunately for America, the Founding Fathers, although sons of the Enlightenment, upheld ordered liberty, the rule of law, the sanctity of human life, the pursuit of happiness, and Natural Rights theory inspired by

the Creator. The Founding Fathers remained classical liberals, who today would be considered conservatives.

On the other hand, the French revolutionaries substituted man for God, and the power of the state as the ultimate divinity. They mocked religion, desecrated churches, and incarnated the power of the collectivist state in the “general will” (*volonté générale*) to suppress the Natural Rights of man and trample on the individual.[2] Once in power, the French revolutionaries became authoritarians, which today would be more akin to modern liberals and radical socialists.

Charles E. Rice, Professor of Law and Constitutional scholar at Notre Dame Law School, wrote:

*Perhaps the clearest example of Enlightenment theory in action was the French Revolution. And the decisive act of that revolution was its substitution of man for God as the source of rights...The French Revolution imposed the equality of servitude. By contrast, the Declaration of Independence rested on the vision of the human person which underlay an equality in freedom before the law.[3]*

Professor Rice further stated, “Liberty was discarded the minute the authority of God, the Author of liberty, was denied. Thereafter the State was supreme, and its subjects consequently had no rights beyond those which the State chose to concede.”[3]

Natural Rights, according to Professor Rice, “are not rights conferred on citizens by the state; rather, the people hold these rights prior to and independently of the state, which is merely enjoined to respect them and assure their free exercise.”[3]

## Classical Versus Modern Liberalism

Unfortunately, the term “liberalism” has evolved in stages and has been used in government-sponsored concepts like utilitarianism, syndicalism, social welfarism, and finally, as we shall bear witness, authoritarian socialism. Presently, there appears to be no indication that the term will revert to its *classical* or *original* meaning, signifying liberty.

A similar process occurred with the term progressivism, a curious but well-calculated term intended to deceive and confuse the concept of advancement in civilization with the attainment of political goals, specifically socialism—as if socialism was necessarily real progress in the path of history.

It should be noted that British statesman Edmund Burke, a Whig Member of Parliament and at first, a classical liberal, became a father of

modern conservatism.[4] Burke ended his longtime friendship with Charles James Fox who, although a nominal classical liberal[5], defended the ideals of the French Revolution, including its violence and authoritarian propensity once the revolutionists had taken control of the government. The final philosophical somersault from classical liberalism to modern liberalism or socialism took place gradually in the latter half of the 19th century after Karl Marx (1818–1883) and Friedrich Engels (1820–1895) published *The Communist Manifesto* in 1848.[6]



Figure 10: Portrait of Charles James Fox (1749–1806), the British Whig politician, painted by Anton Hickel, 1794. National Portrait Gallery, London

The Liberal Party of the true classical liberal politicians more or less died following the defeat of William Gladstone in the 1874 general election; and in its place, the British Labor Party of modern liberalism was born—striving not just for better labor conditions but increasingly toward wealth redistribution, socialistic policies with government intervention, and the abandonment of liberty and laissez faire capitalism.

In the United States, the Industrial Revolution (1760–1840) wrought major changes in society, including huge advancements in economic progress and improvements in the standard of living; and it may have retarded the growth of government and the advent of modern liberalism.

Socialistic government policies veiled as progressive political platforms came just a bit later and largely in small doses in the 20th century—interventionist policies referred to as creeping socialism. Socialism advanced further during the presidency of Franklin Delano Roosevelt (1933–1945), although it was not referred to as such. It was called the New Deal and was justified to fight the Great Depression (1929–1939)—an economic depression that only ended with the industrial mobilization for World War II (1939–1945).[7]

Arrange or explain it however one wishes, today most American conservatives largely fit the mold of the former classical liberals that believed in free trade; less taxation; minimalist government; freedom of religion; personal autonomy (liberty); republican and constitutional principles of government; laissez faire economics; noblesse oblige; and freedom *with* responsibility. Modern conservatism can be defined as follows:

*Modern conservatism is the political philosophy that seeks to preserve the traditional social and religious institutions of Western culture and civilization deemed desirable, if not sacrosanct, and maintain stability, law, and order, while limiting the power of government over man's Natural Rights—that is, life, liberty, property, and the pursuit happiness—without impinging on the rights or property of others. Conservatism respects traditions, preserves laws and institutions, which through the distillation of knowledge and experience, have proven to work, and discards the ones trample truth and eternal principles, have proven unworkable, or are maleficent and of no benefit to humanity.[8,9]*

One should not forget Aristotle's admonition in his criticism of Plato's *Republic* and its idealized and utopic vision:

*Let us remember that we should not disregard the experience of ages; in the multitude of years these things, if they were good, would certainly not have been unknown; for almost everything has been found out, although sometimes they are not put together; in other cases, men do not use the knowledge which they have...[10]*

However, the modern American liberals are big government socialists, which is what the American Democratic Party essentially represents. Modern liberals or socialists want more government involvement; more taxation for the redistribution of wealth and social engineering schemes; the yielding of sovereignty to internationalist organizations; the promotion of globalist treaties to control trade, promote gun control, promote environmental as well as military or “peacekeeping” policies; the undermining or banning of religion from public life; more rules and regulations to control businesses; and in effect, control every aspect of a