

# Threats to Our Liberties: A Call to Action

By Alexander J. Aitken and Steven R. Hemler

The United States of America is facing a potential crisis unlike any we have encountered in our history. The following quote, often attributed to the 18th-century Scottish history professor Alexander Tytler, seems to present an accurate depiction of what has been occurring during our nation's 200+ years of existence.

A democracy is always temporary in nature; it simply cannot exist as a permanent form of government. A democracy will continue to exist up until the time that voters discover that they can vote themselves generous gifts from the public treasury. From that moment on, *the majority always votes for the candidates who promise the most benefits from the public treasury, with the result that every democracy will finally collapse due to loose fiscal policy, which is always followed by a dictatorship.*

The average age of the world's greatest civilizations from the beginning of history, has been about 200 years. During those 200 years, these nations always progressed through the following sequence:

1. From bondage to spiritual faith
2. From spiritual faith to great courage
3. From courage to liberty
4. From liberty to abundance
5. From abundance to complacency
6. From complacency to apathy
7. From apathy to dependence
8. From dependence back into bondage.

These words were written a few years before George Washington became our nation's first President. There is so much truth in these words it makes one tremble, especially since we seem to be in or very close to stage seven, where apathy leads to dependency.

According to data from the U.S. Census Bureau, over half of Americans today live in homes receiving one or more government transfer benefits. That percentage is up over 20 points from the early 1980s. And this increase is not due to our aging population. Only about one-tenth of the increase is due to pensions and health-care programs for seniors. Instead, our country has seen a significant expansion in "means-tested" programs—that is, benefits intended for the poor, such as Medicaid and food stamps. Today, a large majority of Americans on entitlement programs are receiving "means-tested" benefits. Our nation has arrived at a historic turning point as a result of out-of-control spending caused by the explosion of our citizens' dependence upon government.

While the above scenario is depressing, the predictable consequences of current trends are *not* inevitable—if we understand the fundamental causes of what got us to this point and take

appropriate corrective actions in a timely manner. So let's look at how the United States has drifted so far off course to where our very survival as a free nation is in jeopardy. A frank and honest appraisal of the "root causes" of our country's downward spiral is necessary to begin the process of recovery.

## **Causes of Threats to Our Liberties**

### *Government as God*

***It seems too many Americans today have slipped into the delusion of looking to the government as the solution to nearly every human need.*** This strangles community spirit and works of charity. However, government simply cannot meet all of humanity's needs, nor should it even try to.

Part of the problem is that we have lost the biblical view of the role of government, which is merely to preserve order, restrain evil, and promote justice. There is no biblical basis for government to solve every problem under the sun. From a biblical perspective—upheld by both the Catholic and Protestant traditions—private institutions have *the* crucial role to play in society. In healthy communities, when people face problems they are helped by family, friends and neighbors who know them—not by some faraway, uncaring bureaucrat. However, whenever the government assumes an additional function, the reliance on and therefore the need for close family ties and private institutions becomes weaker.

And, taxes that are used for essentially charitable purposes reduce the ability and willingness of people to voluntarily make charitable contributions. It is not uncommon for people to think that they don't need to give much money to charity because "that's what my taxes are used for." This attitude leads many people to "pass the buck" to the government to help the needy, instead of doing so by their own personal initiatives.

In short, government entitlement programs supplant God by becoming the source of the recipient's sustenance ("our daily bread"). And, to a large extent, we are continuing to become a country trapped in our growing dependency upon our government when we should be depending on God, our own self-reliance, and each other for the provision of our daily bread, not the government. The fact of the matter is that the more government acts as God, the less people depend upon God and each other.

### *Our Society's Secularization*

Our nation's founders had a far better solution to human needs than the government. As proud as they were of their new republic, our founders' trust and hope was not in government, but in God. Our nation's founders were convinced that morality and religious vitality were absolutely necessary for the survival of our American Republic. For example, our second President John Adams declared, "***We have no government armed with power capable of contending with human passions unbridled by morality and religion... Our Constitution was made only for a moral and religious people. It is wholly inadequate to the government of any other.***"

And, in his Farewell Address, President George Washington stated, “Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, Religion and Morality are indispensable supports and great pillars of human happiness. *Let us with caution indulge the supposition that morality can be maintained without religion.*”

In the 1830s, French philosopher Alexis de Tocqueville observed (note how much has changed in our country), “The religious atmosphere of the country was the first thing that struck me on arrival in the United States... In the United States, when the seventh day comes, all trade and industry seem suspended throughout the nation. All noise stops. A deep repose, or rather solemn contemplation, takes its place... The safeguard of morality is religion, and morality is the best security of law as well as the surest pledge of freedom... America is great because America is good, and if America ever ceases to be good, America will cease to be great.”

However, since the 1940s the U.S. Supreme Court and other courts have been significantly reducing the influence of religion within our society. This is part of a drive by people who want to exclude faith and religion from the public marketplace of ideas. They claim there must be a “wall of separation” between religion (not just churches) and government—that is between God and State. In so doing, they are depriving us of the very principles needed to secure our freedom.

It is important to realize how this modern interpretation differs from the Founders’ original intent of the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment, which merely states, “Congress shall make no law respecting *an* establishment of religion.” An “establishment of religion” was a church institution that was partially funded through taxes. At the time this amendment was adopted (1790s), there were “established” tax-supported churches in several states.

However, many are now attempting to re-write the clear intent of the U.S. Constitution from forbidding what it actually says, namely supporting “*an* establishment of religion” (a noun), into a general prohibition against “*the* establishment of religion” (a verb). In short, our courts have changed the meaning of “an establishment of religion” from prohibiting government support of a religious *institution* to the exclusion of others, to prohibiting government support of any public religious *activity*.

We all know about the battles over the phrase “under God” in the Pledge of Allegiance and the battles over manger scenes, crosses, etc., on public property. In universities, in the halls of government, and especially in the U.S. Supreme Court, God is often banished from public conversation. If a public school teacher introduces religious ideas and language into the classroom today, s/he is likely to be “called on the carpet” or even fired. Too many students are told they can’t even talk about their faith in class or that they can’t refer to their faith in their homework. These are important, but they are merely skirmishes. *The real battle is about whether God is Lord, or whether government is Lord.*

Furthermore, when public religious influence in our society is reduced, it is no surprise that our public ethics and morality are reduced as well. Many are convinced that the loss of ethics in our relativistic society is a key root cause of recent economic troubles. And, if people have lost the capacity for doing the right thing for the right thing’s sake, then much more is at stake than our economic well-being. In other words, *self-governance is only possible for people who can*

***govern themselves.*** When we can no longer master our own cravings and abandon morality and public virtue, we invite institutional government expansion and intervention.

But more and more government regulation is not the answer—good morality is. And, we need to again recognize that ***religious vitality fosters national morality.*** For, if only those who are morally responsible can govern themselves, and if a healthy religious commitment is necessary for widespread moral responsibility, then self-governance necessarily requires religion.

The drive to “compartmentalize” religious faith to our private lives puts us on a slippery slope where at the bottom is no public prayer, no acknowledgment of our Creator and no recognition of our nation’s spiritual heritage and its connection to America’s strength and freedoms. This weakens the foundation upon which our nation was built, namely that we are to be (as we pledge) a nation “under God” and a people who “In God We Trust” (as it says on our money).

The resultant economic and political consequences we now face, and could face to a greater degree in the near future, would not surprise our nation’s founders. For example, George Mason (one of the key architects of our Constitution) stated, “As nations cannot be rewarded or punished in the next world, so they must be in this. By an inevitable chain of causes and effects, Providence punishes national sins by national calamities.”

In short, it is bad for our nation when our people and our government ignore God. For as President Reagan warned, “Without God, democracy will not and cannot long endure. If we ever forget that we are one nation under God, then we will be a nation gone under.” God was (and should be) the ultimate basis for national sustenance and renewal. That is why we are dreaming if we think we can correct the ills of our government and our society without God’s aid.

## **Solutions to Problems Facing Our Nation**

### *Smaller and More Limited Government*

The silver lining to the gathering dark clouds is the awakening of the consciousness and motivation of the American people. A new awakening is sweeping across America. Americans have risen to the challenge many times in the past and are doing so now.

Harking back to our nation’s founding principles of constitutional limits to government is a powerful message. It’s a message of freedom, especially economic freedom. Government is growing too fast, too much, too expensively and in too many places—and in the process it is crowding out our freedoms. This country will never fulfill its long-run potential to prosper, create jobs, and lead the world unless constitutional limits to government are restored.

Job and income growth come from a growing private sector. Government can create innumerable public sector jobs, but in doing so it supplants the private sector and ultimately decreases the prosperity of its citizens. We need to help others see that the desire to get government spending under control is not an attack on the poor. For all of us, especially the poor, will suffer even more greatly if we don’t get our government’s excessive debt and spending under control.

The expansion of the “nanny state” leads to the erosion of freedom and personal responsibility. God wants us to rely on God, ourselves, and each other—not the government—for help in time of need. However, today too many people look to the government and not to God for help in time of need. We Christians need to help everyone realize that ***we need to rely on God and each other for help in time of need, not the government***, because so many people looking to the government for help got us into this economic mess in the first place.

We should take our bearings from the principle of freedom and the conditions that sustain it. The question to ask is whether current policies and proposals are likely to promote individual responsibility, self-reliance, and opportunity. The answers should recognize that a federal system favorable to local self-government, respectful of religion, and supportive of the family is the time-tested way of cultivating individuals capable of conserving free institutions and taking advantage of the opportunities freedom affords.

America clearly needs a different and better national policy, and we need it now. We already know what needs to be done and how to do it. After taking the oath of office in 1980, President Reagan went to work to convince the American people of the benefits of supply-side economics, lower taxes, less government regulation, and less government spending. Reagan’s program was a resounding success. Once Reagan’s tax cuts were fully phased-in and the fight against inflation was won, the economy took off and was followed by a decades-long economic boom. Therefore, it is again time to secure our economic future and our liberty by cutting taxes, reducing regulations, and shrinking the size of government.

We used to think our political leaders could avert our nation’s fiscal suicide. But it is now clear that the needed changes will not be led from Washington. Spontaneous social movements can make the unthinkable thinkable, and they can do it quickly. So unless free men and women are fully and truly represented and engaged in the process of government, we are going to lose our freedoms and the system of government handed down to us.

### *Restoring our Nation’s Moral and Religious Heritage*

Societies are best changed from the bottom up—by movements of people engaged at the grassroots, networking with one another and actively working together toward shared objectives. At a time when more and more Americans are looking to government to solve so many of life’s problems, we need to remember that a good society is not built by government dictates but by the shared values of what Edmund Burke called the “little platoons” of society—families, communities, churches, civic groups, and other associations.

Politics is just an expression of culture. So long as people of faith continue to lose the culture, we are going to lose politically. But the great moments in history have been when Christians have gotten engaged (e.g., the civil rights movement). As a result of their work, the culture was transformed. It’s a healthy culture, more than anything else, which produces a healthy society. And a healthy society produces healthy politics. If we value our liberties, if we believe in the fundamental principles upon which our nation is based, then we owe it to each other and to future generations to get involved with others who are seeking to restore our nation’s religious, cultural and economic heritage.

***When we see our culture losing its moral footing, it is often because believers have failed to adequately bring Christian truth to bear in society. Christians have, for too long, been relatively silent spectators to the secularization of Western society.*** However, as the “salt” of our society we believers must never tire of being courageous advocates for and sincere examples of seeking God’s Will for our lives and for our nation.

We Christians need to understand that becoming more actively engaged in the “culture war” by bearing witness about the sanctity of life, the sanctity of marriage, and religious liberty isn’t political—it is profoundly moral and essential. It’s about who we are as Christians and our relationship to our culture. Of course, as we Christians become more actively involved in cultural and political struggles we must remember to present our convictions with civility and respect, and the most important thing we can do is pray for God’s Will to be done through us.

But first and foremost, if we are to avoid a great national calamity we each need to confess and repent of our moral failures and national sins. For the road to national and cultural renewal begins on our knees. Let’s hope and pray that our nation will return to its religious roots and founding principles before it is too late. We certainly do not want to wait until C.S. Lewis’s observation comes true that “suffering is God’s megaphone to rouse a deaf world.”

However, if a great calamity does befall our nation we must remember to ***look to God and each other for help, and not to the government.*** For seeking to make government the solution to all our human needs, and not God and each other, will have been a major cause of any great calamity that may befall our country. In short, as a nation and as individuals we must learn to trust in God and each other, instead of the government.