

America Liberalism

The United States of America is known throughout the world as the benchmark of a free society. America believes in a complex philosophy of liberalism. The question is where did this complex idea come from? Well one idea is that it was inherited from the early settlers of the American Colonies and it has been transforming ever since and is now the form we see today. My purpose is to prove to an audience that Puritan Theology and culture, Anti-Federalist arguments, and Federalist political thought, have all been profound influences on this idea of liberalism.

“By liberalism we mean that Americans tend to look first to the individual as the source of value rather than to an imposed dogmatic creed or hierarchy” (American Political Thinking). According to the way we look at liberalism in America today, there are two strands of it. The first strand is called “Classical Liberalism.” This is the idea that peoples’ property rights, their protection and a free economic market are more important than human welfare. For quite a long time, this was the only type of liberalism there was, until many people began to think that human rights were more important than any economic prosperity derived from free enterprise. This change in thought is called the progressive movement. This movement was created by a rise in the great concentrations of urban wealth. This movement was in opposition to the Laizze Fair attitudes of the classical liberals. They did not see the poor as being poor because they were stupid, lazy or inferior, but rather because of an unfair social and economic system. This directs progressive advocates to the path of redistributing the wealth among all of the people. It is important to realize that both of these ideas are vital aspects of the general form of liberalism we’ve conformed to over time. A good example of liberalism

in today's American society is how there is an array of political parties. The Republicans consist of ideas that are generally based on classical liberalism while their counterparts, the Democrats, lean more towards the progressive side. However, it is important to remember that both these parties have liberal roots, due to the fact they were both constructed from building blocks of basic liberal practices.

A liberal is basically someone who believes in seeing the individual as rational and self-interested and being entitled to a collection of rights, such as those leading to the preservation of life, liberty, and property. Governments are created by consent of the participating parties. Government as we know it, has two major responsibilities – protect the individual rights of the people it serves and maintain public order. However, governments also become feared as a source of tyranny. It is also important to know that all liberals believe in the same core set of values, being, individualism, limited government, natural rights, property rights and the idea that individuals are more important than society. A tried and true liberal also believes the government exists for the purpose of serving individuals seeking the pursuit of happiness.

The Puritans are a people that struggled gravely while attempting to work their theology into their everyday life. They have many paradoxes in their world of beliefs, but through these conflicts they have contributed to American political thought. The first of the primary paradoxes' is the idea of political liberty versus theocracy. Through these challenges the Puritans came up with many revolutionary ideas. The Puritans did not believe in any source of human authority, only in the authority of the Old Testament out of the Bible, and only the Old Testament due to the believe that every word was written by the hand of God. Other religious authorities or staples were not given credibility,

particularly the Pope. The Puritans believed that if there is no religious authority, then attempting to impress one central religious belief among all people is wrong, immoral and will perhaps damage your soul. This creed in turn created religious toleration, which happens to be one of the more progressive liberal ideas that most Americans hold today. The second paradox is the belief in predestination versus the need for human intervention to determine one's admittance into St. Peter's gates. Unlike the ideas of Catholicism, the Puritans did not believe that just anyone could go to heaven; they did not believe that the more virtuous a life you lead - the better chance you'd have at getting into heaven (The Puritan Millennium). They believed it was predestined and that only the pre-chosen elite would be so lucky as to gain the ticket all Christians yearn for, a pass for entry to Heaven's gates. However, the Puritans were very active people in that they believed that good fortune was a sign of being one of the elite (The Puritan Millennium). Puritan people would work hard, thus bringing good virtue, and perhaps proving to others that they were among the chosen few. This is not a liberal theme, unlike the progressive idea that all humans were created equal and had a certain amount of natural rights. The Puritans believed that there was a group of elite among them and that throughout life on earth, that selection of people was superior to everyone else only because God had decided to make it that way.

It is in Roger Williams's writings that we see some of the early formation of the idea of American liberalism. "He boldly proclaimed that all people have a natural right to religious liberty and attacked the undemocratic nature of contemporary governments. He argued that sovereignty lies with the people, not with kings, parliaments, states, or governors" (American Political Thinking). This being a revolutionary idea at the time

almost sets the stage for the train of thought that passes through the American colonies. However other writers such as John Winthrop also make points that break down the idea of liberty and rights. “In his speech ‘A Little Speech on Liberty’, he distinguishes between natural and civil liberty” (American Political Thinking). Natural liberty as he describes it is the enemy of great truth and peace, being the idea that every man can do as he pleases just because he is entitled to, because nature gave him the liberty to do such a thing. Civil liberty on the other hand is a kind of moral liberty in that it is considered to be a covenant between God and man in this type of moral law. It is the liberty to create and recreate the authority, which society as a whole has to live under. Winthrop saw that personal freedom must end somewhere, but didn’t let go of the notion that the people should be in control of where that freedom ends. Although no answer will please everyone, how can society as a whole determine where a line can be drawn between personal freedom and the prosperity of the whole?

The Puritans were far from what we might consider “liberal”, but one can see signs of many liberal themes in their notion of Covenant - government by agreement, and their aggressive strains of individualism. Through the Puritans, we also see early forms of capitalism, justified by their work ethic and comfort with worldly success as a sign of being one of the chosen. They also confronted liberalism with a challenging force through their notion of a vengeful God. The Puritans also offer mankind a sense of humility and limits, which a dynamic liberal society lacks.

The Constitution of the United States of America is said to be one of the most liberal documents ever written, however its creators battled with the concept of liberalism and over time has constantly evolved into what we have today. The Federalists were the

driving force of people behind the creation of the Constitution and perhaps they felt a need to create this document because they saw a need to regulate and create a government for a liberal society that needed more authority and structure. Although this may have been a good idea for a newborn country, some believe it still goes against true liberal notions, because it takes power and freedom away from the people and puts it in the hands of the government. “The federalist design for the U. S. Constitution was a negative one geared toward preventing evils from occurring rather than a positive one geared toward establishing a democratic utopia” (American Political Thinking). However, you may look at it as though the balance of authority and freedom in America today was set by the standard put forth by the Constitution and the Federalists ideology, which is very deeply imbedded with liberalism.

Alexander Hamilton, who was one of the major contributors to the Constitution and the writer of a large portion of the Federalist papers, said, “Money is the vital and principal of the body of politic,” (American Political Thinking). He was a Federalist that wanted to use the Constitution to form a financial aristocracy in the United States. “Hamilton envisioned a strong government by ‘the wise, the good, and the rich,’ a dynamic, centralized form of aristocracy that would strive for industrial financial power,” (American Political Thinking). Even though it seems as if Hamilton saw that the United States was not to be an agrarian state like so many thought, his ideas of an aristocracy provide an alternative to the ideas of the liberal society that has been described. America, as a society, did become the industrial powerhouse that Hamilton wanted us to be and many of his ideals did come true with the formation of business conglomerates to form a sort of financial aristocracy. Their power was only that of influence in that they had no

definite or real political power. Hamilton was deeply afraid of living in a society that was too liberal. He did not like the idea of the redistribution of wealth because he foresaw a society where the 'haves' would be taking from the 'have nots'. Hamilton embodied all the central ideas of the Federalists, some which were liberal and others that were not. He supported the idea of a big government, which appeared to be a somewhat conservative idea, however he was for the freedom of everyone to seek self-profit which is the backbone of the notion of a classic liberal (The Noblest Minds). Hamilton was a businessman that molded ideas as he saw fit to best benefit himself and others in his same social class. Regardless of his constant swaying between liberal and conservative, he played an important role in shaping the American notion of liberalism.

Perhaps the greatest staple of this liberal movement was the creation of the Declaration of Independence. This document, primarily written by Thomas Jefferson, was in a sense, an explanation given to the English and the rest of the world, why the colonists were seceding from the king. The formal arguments in the document are based on very liberal ideas. The Declaration argues for the equality of man, it says that, "We hold these truths to be self-evident; that all men are created equal; they are endowed by their creator with inalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness..."(American Political Thinking). Jefferson is proving the point that while it is obvious that all men are created equal, the differences that people do have are made among themselves. We make our own differences in opinion, but we are all entitled to the same amount of natural rights. These ideas are the basis for American liberalism, almost every facet of thought that has come from the United States that is considered to

be liberal contains the notion that every man has the same amount of divinely given or natural rights as any other man.

The Federalists gave us the building blocks to put together our ideal of liberalism, and they also gave us alternative paths to take if liberalism didn't offer a method of production, peace and prosperity that would succeed. They put in writing the cornerstone for what we deem to be liberal. Hamilton, Madison, Jay and Washington and all of the other leaders of the federalist party may have had different intentions when they contributed to the Declaration, Constitution and the Federalist papers, but now they serve as roadmaps to debate law, utilizing them as our liberal guides to make sure we don't fall off track. What we behold in our minds as liberal may not be what Hamilton or Jefferson had in mind, but it is structured by the same basic principle we look back on when we seek verification. The Federalists had a huge and lasting effect on the American thought on the ideas of liberalism.

Perhaps the most critical and ingenious part of the Constitution was not advocated by the Federalists nearly as much as the Anti-Federalists. This incredible document is that's known as the Bill of Rights; perhaps the most liberal document in American history. It gives the people their deserved rights, and makes sure that the government cannot take these rights away from the people it serves. The Anti-Federalists supported the idea of a small government and wanted the Constitution to be a loose union allowing the states to govern themselves. "The supremacy of people does not secure the rights of individuals and minorities against the majority," (What the Anti-Federalists Were For). The Anti-Federalists were afraid of a majority faction taking power and stripping the weaker minority of its rights. They desired an equal distribution of power and thought

the best way to accomplish their goal was to have many smaller governments not so tightly bound together by one lawful unit.

There are a few main points why the Anti-Federalist party was against the Constitution and a large national government. For starters, they thought that the ability to tax took away from the liberal idea of free commerce and the right for one's self to make profit. They saw the president's ability to raise and control an army as one single person having the capability to infringe on the lesser people's rights. They feared that the president could become a tyrant if not checked, balanced, or challenged. Jefferson and his clan also did not like the fact that the Constitution states that Congress can make any law that would further increase the power of Congress. They were in most aspects fighting for the little guy, because they opposed the idea of one body of government having too much power. The Anti-Federalists practically brought the liberal idea to an extreme by opposing and challenging any reduction in the rights of the people. They more often than not seemed to lean towards a more true democracy than did their political counterpart, the Federalists.

There are, however many points that both the Federalists and Anti-Federalists agreed on. Both believed that liberty and the protection of rights were the proper duties of a government and the only legitimate source of political authority was consent. The only proper form of government was republican and that a republican government should be limited by a constitution. The parties also believed that the states all be joined together by a union. Looking at these ideas it seems to be that most of them are the foundation of American liberalism, because not only do they lean towards the "Classical Liberal," but they also share similarities with the "Progressive Liberal."

The main thing that Puritans, Federalists and Anti-Federalists have in common is that they are all American. Now that the obvious has been stated, observe how they all have contributed in different ways to the ideology of American political thought. The Puritans theology forced them to think a certain way. They wanted to live and thrive in a virtuous society and needed to live a life that would be successful so that they could discover that they were one of the chosen elite. They wished everyone would worship as they did; however their religion was never impressed on those who did not seek it. They gave us the notions of toleration for all people and an ambition to live the good life. The Federalists provided America with the idea of a big government, and with that they gave us free commerce, freedom from tyranny, and the notion that all men are created equal. No matter your ethnic background or religious preference, you'll have the same freedom to make anything you want of yourself. The Anti-Federalist gave society what the Federalists left out. They exemplified the people's rights, defined them and said that no matter what; no body of government or person could take these rights away. They gave the people the power over the government and made sure that the public was able to govern themselves. Freedom can be defined as the saying, that "I will stand there and listen to a man insult me and degrade my ideas while expressing his opinion, for I have the freedom to express my own." It is truly amazing that all these different ideas came together at once to create this fabulous nation and a very unique way of understanding liberty, freedom, and justice for all, under the theory of American liberalism.

