



A Necessary Evil: A History of American Distrust of Government

Garry Wills

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In his most original and important work on American history since "Lincoln at Gettysburg," Garry Wills examines Americans' skepticism and distrust of government, which he ascribes to our misunderstanding of the Founding Fathers and of much of our history. In "A Necessary Evil," Wills scrutinizes our anti-governmental attitudes -- from the revolt of the colonies against king and parliament (romanticized as a revolution against central authority in general) to the present justifications for tax revolts, gun owning, and term limits. Wills reveals the roots of distrust of government -- from mainstream to extremist -- from the Founding Fathers' rancorous disputes, through secession struggles and Civil War, to the present. He shows how we have handed down a number of myths that inflate or distort our ideas about what freedom means and that perpetuate our mistrust of government. "A Necessary Evil" debunks some of our fondest myths -- that minutemen, not the Continental Army, won the Revolutionary War; that checks and balances were designed to make our government inefficient; that the national ideal should be "citizen-politicians" serving limited terms; that the states are sovereign; that the president is "our" commander in chief; that the three branches of government are equal; that local government is always most responsive to our needs; that the Second Amendment gives everyone a right to own a gun; that the frontier was "tamed" by individualists' firearms; that insurrection is a constitutional prerogative. Embedded deep in our national psyche, Wills argues, is our acceptance of anti-governmental values. From Jefferson, Madison, and Hamilton to Webster, Calhoun, and Lincoln; from frontier insurrections to Timothy McVeigh; from Thoreau and Emerson to hippie communes; from John Brown to Martin Luther King Jr.; and from secessionists to bombers of abortion clinics, Wills illustrates the peculiarly American penchant for fighting our own government -- both from left and right -- as he distinguishes between resistance to legitimate government and disobedience to unjust laws. We Americans tend not to value government as a force for good, but to tolerate it as a necessary evil. Wills surprises us continually in "A Necessary Evil," as he shows why we hold our own elected government in disdain.

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