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Time to reflect on our nation's early days

Richard Eckstrom

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On the third Monday of February, Americans celebrate Presidents Day.

Established in the 1880s to honor George Washington, this federal holiday – officially named “Washington’s Birthday” – was initially celebrated each year on Feb. 22.

It wasn’t until 1971 that Congress moved it to the third Monday in February, providing federal workers a three-day weekend, and it soon became commonly known as Presidents Day.

While not mandated by federal law, a number of states include the birthday of Abraham Lincoln, who was born on Feb. 12, in their celebration of Presidents Day.

These days, Americans don’t spend much time dwelling on the holiday’s origins. For schoolchildren (and for many public employees) Presidents Day simply means a day off. For others, it means heading to the malls for Presidents Day sales.

Regardless of how it’s observed, I believe Presidents Day offers a unique opportunity to reflect on America’s past – not just the accomplishments of any one president, but the collective vision of our nation’s early leaders.

Nearly two and a half centuries ago, men and women yearning for freedom began a bold experiment in self-governance on a new continent. Their goal was to create a better life free of the shackles of imperial rule.

As they debated how this new nation would work, they agreed that creating a better life meant adopting a system of government that would do only those things they could not do as individuals.

They pictured a system that, as Thomas Jefferson put it, “governs least,” a government that provides essential services and then gets out of the way, so that government itself doesn’t become a burden for citizens like the governments they had recently fled.

They conceived a nation that rewards hard work, rather than one that punishes success. And their model stood the test of time for generations of Americans.

We’ve grown a government that tries to be all things to all people and spends way beyond its means. Much of the money being spent is borrowed against future generations, leaving our children and grandchildren buried under massive amounts of debt.

We’ve developed an “entitlement mentality” in which more and more citizens are becoming unnecessarily dependent on government assistance. Especially in recent decades, many have come to depend on government to provide those things they could provide for themselves.

To my mind, few things more clearly represent how far we’ve allowed our government to drift astray than the recent federal mandate on employers and health insurance companies to cover the cost of contraceptives.

That mandate represents government overreach at its worst. It was opposed by Americans from all walks of life – ranging from Christian hospitals, colleges and other organizations who opposed it on the grounds of religious freedom to those who opposed it simply on the grounds that it interferes with basic civil liberties.

But Washington policy-makers decided that people have a right to free contraception, and they decided that it was the federal government’s role to provide it.

The contraception mandate, by the way, was part of Obamacare – the new law nationalizing health care.

Free birth control? Nationalized health care? I’m guessing that’s not what our founders had in mind.

Today, many of our nation’s problems – such as our \$17 trillion national debt – result from the gradual shift from Jefferson’s ideal government to our current be-everything-to-everyone system.

This brings me back to Presidents Day.

Surely, no one can fault children for celebrating a day off or shoppers for taking advantage of special discounts. But we’d also do well to use this holiday – and similar occasions – to pause and think about those who made this country what it is today and to ponder their exceptional vision for our fledgling nation.

I believe there’s still tremendous wisdom to be found today in their philosophy about government.

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