



CASCADE POLICY INSTITUTE

# CASCADE COMMENTARY

October 2001

No. 2001-33

## Summary

Confidence in the U.S. government has skyrocketed since the September 11 terrorist attacks. In this time of crisis we should remember the importance of constitutional limits on government.

**Word count: 685**

***“The number of people who trust the government to do the right thing has doubled since last year, and now is more than three times higher than in 1994.”***

## Terrorism and blind faith in government

*By James Bovard*

One of the most surprising results of the September 11 terrorist attacks is the sharp increase in the number of Americans who now trust the federal government. According to a *Washington Post* poll released on September 27, 64 percent of Americans now “trust the government in Washington to do what is right” either “just about always” or “most of the time.” The number of people who trust the government to do the right thing has doubled since last year—and is now more than three times higher than in 1994.

*The Washington Post* interviewed a 26-year-old New Jersey high-school math teacher who proclaimed, “I have a renewed respect for the federal government, absolutely. People see that the government is one of the only avenues we have to get some things done. It puts renewed hope about the government and their capabilities to do things.” *The Post* ran a photo of a 22-year-old woman praying on a hillside across from the Pentagon. The lady told a reporter that she “puts her trust in God and government—that’s all I can do.”

The terrorist attacks could not have succeeded if several federal agencies had not dropped the ball. Yet, the bigger the catastrophe, the more credulous many people seem to become.

Many expect the terrorist atrocities could fundamentally alter Americans’ political thinking. Harvard political scientist Robert Putnam said: “I think there is the potential that September 11 will turn out to be a turning point for civic America . . . There could be some good coming from it if it causes us to become . . . more aware of the obligations we have to other people and more open-minded about the role of government.”

A *Wall Street Journal* front page article on September 26 vivified the new era of opportunity in Washington: “In just two weeks, the terrorist attacks have turned a two-decade trend toward less government into a headlong rush for more.” *Washington Post* columnist Jim Hoagland, in an article headlined “Government’s Comeback,” declared, “Bush and his congressional allies must . . . return government closer to the center of American life, not whittle away further at its powers and funding.” Hoagland asserted that, before the terrorists’ attack, “government

was rapidly losing its relevance, its reach, and its right to make demands on the purses and practices of private citizens.”

Perhaps Hoagland has been too busy doing “Big Picture” articles to notice that federal revenues have soared over the last decade. Nor have there been any reports of the Federal Register suffering from anorexia. The rumors of Big Government’s demise are a hoax to make people believe they have suffered from a shortage—rather than an overdose—of government in recent years.

*Wall Street Journal* columnist Al Hunt, in an article headlined “Government to the Rescue,” called for “a moratorium on government-bashing” along with a sweeping expansion of government spending and regulation. Hunt conceded, “To be sure, there always are dangers in bigger government. Congress and the press must play a critical oversight role.” But Congress and the Washington press corps have consistently done a worse job overseeing Big Government than the CIA and FBI have done keeping an eye on foreign terrorists. Hunt favors a blanket expansion of government even though there is no reason to expect archaic checks-and-balances to prevent fresh government abuses.

At a time when Americans are being urged to put their faith in government, we must not forget the wisdom of the Founding Fathers. John Adams wrote in 1772, “There is danger from all men. The only maxim of a free government ought to be to trust no man living with power to endanger the public liberty.” Thomas Jefferson wrote in 1799, “Free government is founded in jealousy, not confidence.... Let no more be heard of confidence in men, but bind him down from mischief by the chains of the Constitutions.”

To blindly trust government is to automatically vest it with excessive power. Americans must not let the defense against terrorists subvert the bulwarks of freedom. We owe it to both our forefathers and progeny not to squander our constitutional inheritance in a moment of panic.

---

*James Bovard is a policy advisor to the Future of Freedom Foundation in Fairfax, Va., and an adjunct scholar to Cascade Policy Institute, a Portland, Oregon think tank. He is author of the recently published, Feeling Your Pain: The Explosion & Abuse of Government Power During the Clinton-Gore Years. He is speaking in Portland for Freedom Seminars on November 17; call (503) 370-7188 for information and reservations.*

***“We owe it to both our forefathers and progeny not to squander our constitutional inheritance in a moment of panic.”***

### **Attention editors and producers**

*Cascade Commentaries* are provided for reprint in newspapers and other publications, with credit given to author(s) and Cascade. Contact Cascade to arrange print or broadcast interviews on this commentary topic. Electronic text files are available online at [www.cascadepolicy.org/cctext/](http://www.cascadepolicy.org/cctext/).

Please contact:

Angela Eckhardt  
Program Director  
Cascade Policy Institute  
813 SW Alder Street, Suite 450  
Portland, Oregon 97205

Phone: (503) 242-0900  
Fax: (503) 242-3822

[www.cascadepolicy.org](http://www.cascadepolicy.org)  
[angela@cascadepolicy.org](mailto:angela@cascadepolicy.org)