Parents naturally rejoice when their children show evidence of learning important lessons like keeping their hands clear of hot stoves or refusing unwrapped candy from a stranger. The myriad little lessons of childhood boil down to the familiar admonition: actions have consequences.

If there is a corresponding master lesson for adulthood, it may well be this: ideas have consequences. On the level of individuals, it is clear enough that a person’s thinking affects his or her actions—from moment to moment and over the course of time. On the level of nations and societies, thought influences communal action in fascinating ways. History abundantly illustrates that behind real-life events, social trends and policies lie philosophers and theoreticians. Would there have been a French Revolution without a Rousseau? How many of the world-shaking political and scientific advances of recent centuries would have unfolded without the Enlightenment thinkers who promoted and described the ideal of progress?

God gives us the great gift of freedom so that we may employ it for worthy ends. Of course, as Louis XVI discovered, it is not always (and for everyone) good news that ideas produce consequences. The entire world would have been far better off without Nazism and Communism, for example, and the intellectual currents that spawned these virulent ideologies. The pernicious influence of a Mein Kampf or a Communist Manifesto cast bloody shadows across the 20th century. Our new century has already suffered under the weight of the horrible consequences of warped worldviews.

I am still undecided on the question of how much alarm is genuinely warranted by a particularly objectionable fashion affecting our country in recent decades: a fierce antigovernment ideology readily observed on the national stage. Intense and reflexive hostility to federal authority has inspired acts of terrorism (the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing), the proliferation of armed militia groups in several states and a range of extremist movements that employ the words freedom and sovereign in idiosyncratic ways.

In more mainstream circles, a diffuse suspicion of just about every activity undertaken by government pervades national political discourse. There is no need to recount the latest upsurge in the antitax sentiment that surfaces periodically throughout U.S. history. Recent decades have also witnessed particularly loud voices proclaiming what I have taken to calling the reverse Midas-touch argument: everything government does backfires by warping healthy economic and behavioral incentives and producing disastrous unintended consequences.

Proponents of such simplistic analysis rarely walk away with the whole loaf they covet. Think tanks and lobbying groups with the strongest of aversions to a healthy public sector still experience as much frustration as jubilation. But even when they do not carry the day, they do have a way of generating
background noise and nudging the debate further away from pragmatic policy and socially responsible decisions. The most punitive aspects of the welfare reform law of 1996, to cite just one example, reflect the influence of shrill antigovernment voices. Ask thousands of low-income, single-parent families who lost vital public assistance when they hit program time limits or could not comply with mandated work requirements in the absence of childcare subsidies. Ideas certainly do have consequences.

Our nation stands at a crossroads, where we will soon be witnessing the interplay of ideas and consequences in especially momentous ways. Over the next few weeks, we face weighty decisions regarding budget cuts, the national debt ceiling, the future of Medicare and Medicaid and much else. Will our national leaders scuttle the much-needed reforms of the Dodd-Frank financial regulation act in the name of free markets? Will Congress sacrifice the new Consumer Protection Bureau on the altar of smaller government?

I worry less about the possible electoral success of the Libertarian Party or renewed interest in the philosophy of Ayn Rand than about the potential narrowing of our collective framework of values. God gives us the great gift of freedom so that we may employ it for worthy ends. Proponents of shrinking government for the supposed goal of preserving liberty deliberately reduce complex social equations to a single variable. In so doing, they exclude from consideration crucial human values. If values like solidarity, social justice and the common good are ignored, we are all impoverished.

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