

The National Debt

The Founding Fathers of the United States considered a national debt to be a great burden that was to be avoided and resolved with the greatest of diligence. They considered it to be a bane to the liberty of the Nation, and counseled most emphatically that the Nation guard against it.

In his annual State of the Union reports to Congress, George Washington spoke often of the burden of national debt. Thomas Jefferson devoted a great deal of time in each of his annual State of the Union reports to reviews of the Nation's efforts to retire the national debt. The efforts to accomplish that were largely based upon sale of federal lands to citizens of the United States (only). This accomplished at least two great goals: It placed within the power of the people the means to produce prosperity for themselves and the Nation, and it removed the debt which burdened the Nation. In this we may see an example of the "original intent" of the Founding Fathers.

It is interesting to note that the last time the Nation was completely debt-free was during the Andrew Jackson Administration, and that was achieved through the sale of federally-held land.

George Washington on Debt

Washington felt that the national debt should be paid without delay, saying:

"I entertain a strong hope that the state of the national finances is now sufficiently matured to enable you to enter upon a systematic and effectual arrangement for the regular redemption and discharge of the public debt, according to the right which has been reserved to the government. No measure can be more desirable, whether viewed with an eye to its intrinsic importance or to the general sentiment and wish of the nation."¹

"No pecuniary consideration is more urgent than the regular redemption and discharge of the public debt; on none can delay be more injurious, or an economy of time more valuable."²

"The time which has elapsed since the commencement of our fiscal measures has developed our pecuniary resources so as to open a way for a definitive plan for the redemption of the public debt. It is believed that the result is such as to encourage Congress to consummate this work without delay. Nothing can more promote the permanent welfare of the nation, and nothing would be more grateful to our constituents. Indeed, whatsoever is unfinished of our system of public credit cannot be benefitted by procrastination; and as far as may be practicable, we ought to place that credit on grounds which cannot be disturbed, and to prevent that progressive accumulation of debt which must ultimately endanger all governments."³

"It will afford me heartfelt satisfaction to concur in such further measures as will ascertain to our country the prospect of a speedy extinguishment of the debt. Posterity may have cause to regret if, from any motive, intervals of tranquility are left unimproved for accelerating this valuable end."⁴

Washington also advised that the Nation avoid national debt when possible, and quickly repay it when incurred:

“As a very important source of strength and security, cherish public credit. One method of preserving it is to use it as sparingly as possible, avoiding occasions of expense by cultivating peace, but remembering also that timely disbursements to prepare for danger frequently prevent much greater disbursements to repel it; avoiding likewise the accumulation of debt, not only by shunning occasions of expense, but by vigorous exertions in time of peace to discharge the debts which unavoidable wars may have occasioned, not ungenerously throwing upon posterity the burden which we ourselves ought to bear.”⁵

Thomas Jefferson on Debt

Thomas Jefferson was no less emphatic in his resolve to extinguish public debt, saying:

“I...place economy among the first and most important of republican virtues, and public debt as the greatest of the dangers to be feared.”⁶

“I am for...applying all the possible savings of the public revenue to the discharge of the national debt.”⁷

“I consider the fortunes of our republic as depending, in an eminent degree, on the extinguishment of the public debt before we engage in any war; because, that done, we shall have revenue enough to improve our country in peace and defend it in war, without recurring either to new taxes or loans. But if the debt should once more be swelled to a formidable size, its entire discharge will be despaired of, and we shall be committed to the English career of debt, corruption, and rottenness, closing with revolution. The discharge of the debt, therefore, is vital to the destinies of our government.”⁸

“The principle of spending money to be paid by posterity, under the name of funding, is but swindling futurity on a large scale.”⁹

It is tragic to note how the Nation in recent decades has strayed from the sound counsel of those who founded this great Nation. The chart below captures the essence of the matter by equating the national debt to the burden upon each man, woman, and child in the United States:

United States National Debt Comparison

Year	National Debt	Population	Per Capita Debt
1800	\$82,976,294	5,309,000	\$15.63
1900	\$2,136,961,091	75,995,000	\$28.12
1913	The 16th Amendment (income tax) ratified,		

17th Amendment (direct election of U.S. Senators) ratified,

Federal Reserve established

1980	\$930,200,000,000	226,542,199	\$4,106.08
2006	\$9,000,000,000,000	298,000,000	\$30,200.00
2010	\$13,000,000,000,000	310,000,000	\$42,000.00

Today's politicians have buried the Nation in debt. They have done this by ignoring the constitutional limits of their power, acting as though they have power to tax and spend for any whim that strikes them. They tax trillions of hard-earned dollars each year from the citizens of this land, only to spend hundreds of billions more each year than they collect. Sadly, most of the spending is not authorized by the United States Constitution.

The solution is a return to the constraints of power on the federal government which exist within the United States Constitution. James Madison stated that the powers of the national government were "few and well defined." Perhaps, when the people of the Nation again understand that fact, the Nation's leadership will be compelled to abide by their oath to uphold the Constitution of the United States.

---Scott N. Bradley

1 - Fourth Annual Address to Congress. Fitzpatrick 32:211. (1792)

2 - Fifth Annual Address to Congress. Fitzpatrick 33:168. (1793)

3 - Sixth Annual Address to Congress. Fitzpatrick 34:36. (1794)

4 - Eighth Annual Address to Congress. Fitzpatrick 35:319. (1796)

5 - Farewell Address. Fitzpatrick 35:230. (1796)

6 - Bergh 15:47. (1816)

7 - To Elbridge Gerry. Bergh 10:77. (1799)

8 - To Albert Gallatin. Bergh 12:324. (1809)

9 - Bergh 15:23. (1816)