

U.S. moving toward czarism, away from democracy

David Sirota

Sunday, January 18, 2009

History's great American parables teach that if anything unified our founders, it was a deep antipathy to dictatorship. As bourgeois revolutionaries from Boston to Philadelphia courageously split with the British crown in 1776, they created three equal branches of government to prevent, in the words of James Madison, "a tyrannical concentration of all the powers" in a president's hands.

For two centuries since, civics books, Hollywood biopics and party convention speeches have constructed a mythology insisting that this democratic commitment to checks and balances makes our country a beacon of freedom - the "shining city on a hill" overlooking a despotic world below. We are told that democracy's tumult - its messy debates, legislative sausage-making and electoral friction - is the best way to guarantee that public policy represents public will, therefore making us a strong and durable nation.

If that is true, then every patriot should be concerned about the intensifying efforts to supplant democracy with something far more authoritarian. Call it American czarism.

That term should be as impossibly oxymoronic as crash landings and deafening silence, considering our Constitution's desire to create a "government of laws and not of men," as John Adams said. But politics is filled with paradoxes from Reagan Democrats to Obama Republicans, and czars - i.e., policymakers granted extralegal, cross-agency powers - have become increasingly prevalent in our government over the past century.

After the Great Flood of 1927, for instance, President Calvin Coolidge named Herbert Hoover the federal government czar overseeing relief efforts, and Hoover subsequently appointed "dictators" (he actually used that term) to help coordinate the response.

During the power consolidations of the New Deal in the 1930s, a Time magazine story headlined "Dictator or Democrat" reported on the "suspicions of those throughout the nation who have an uneasy feeling that [President Franklin] Roosevelt, under cover of the emergency, is trying 'to slip something over' on democracy." In the 1940s and 1950s, parks commissioner Robert Moses - famously known as "the power broker" - amassed so much personal authority that he was able to almost single-handedly redesign New York City. And lately, presidents have given us poverty, energy, drug, health and even Iraq war czars.

Until now, this slow lurch toward czarism has primarily reflected the ancient, almost innate human desire for power and paternalistic leadership. The current president reminded us that executives see all-powerful "deciders" when they look in the mirror. And Americans - sans kings to rally around - have been elevating commanders in chief to superhero status well before Barack Obama's Marvel comic-book debut and George Bush's flight-suited "Top Gun" impression in 2003.

In recent years, this culture of "presidentialism," as Vanderbilt Professor Dana Nelson calls it, has justified the Patriot Act, warrantless wiretaps and a radical theory of the "unitary executive" that aims to provide a jurisprudential rationale for total White House supremacy over all government. But only in the past three months has American czarism metastasized from a troubling slow-growth tumor to a potentially deadly cancer.

In October, Congress relinquished its most basic oversight powers and gave Treasury Secretary Henry Paulson sole authority to dole out billions of bailout dollars to Wall Street. At the same time, it did nothing when Federal Reserve chairman Ben Bernanke used fiats to commit "\$5 trillion worth of new money, loan guarantees and loosened lending requirements," according to Politico - all while he refused to tell the public who is receiving the largesse.

And the Washington Post has reported that lawmakers may appoint a "car czar" who "would essentially control the purse strings" of an auto industry bailout and "could force Detroit's Big Three automakers into bankruptcy" if he or she didn't like their behavior.

Put bluntly, the unprecedented usurpation of spending power by the executive branch and the Federal Reserve is systematically undermining our democracy's most sacrosanct principle - the one that is supposed to ensure "the legislative department alone has access to the pockets of the people," as Madison said. And this new czarism is so strident because it reflects both executive power lust and the 21st century economy.

Today, keystrokes and mouse-clicks instantly whisk trillions of dollars across the planet, and many of those keystrokes and mouse-clicks are uninhibited by the grindingly slow processes of democracy.

Saudi princes don't have to publish announcements in a federal register before moving cash from sovereign wealth funds into foreign investments. China's rulers aren't obligated to obtain legislative approval when buying or dumping U.S. Treasury bills; and transnational corporations will not wait for public hearings before shuttering offices, eliminating jobs and cutting off credit.

Our nation is integrally connected to this fast-moving globalized economy, and American czarism effectively posits that in order to compete, we must anoint strongmen as saviors, prioritize speed instead of sobriety and emulate dictatorship instead of democracy.

Indeed, the Economist magazine's prediction that the "economic crisis may increase the attractiveness of the Chinese model of authoritarian capitalism" is coming true right here at home, as we seem ever more intent on replicating - rather than resisting - that model.

This, as much as personal hubris, explains why Paulson and Bernanke sought unprecedented latitude in spending trillions - they want to be able to move as fast as their autocratic counterparts in other countries, and believe congressional oversight will slow them down.

It explains why UC Berkeley economist Laura Tyson says we need an auto czar who will "take a number of approaches to this problem that are already known, that have been discussed endlessly, and force it through" - because to economists, a czar quickly "forcing it through" is more important than any consideration for democratic deliberation.

And it explains why when Obama aides this week demanded complete control over the second half of the Wall Street bailout funds, House Financial Services Committee chairman Rep. Barney Frank, D- Mass., shirked his oversight duties and said he's "willing to accept their word" that they will spend the money responsibly. In czarism, that's what legislators do: "accept the word" of the czar.

In sum, it explains why the age-old struggle between capitalism and democracy is once again defining our politics - and why capitalism is now winning.

That triumph may be terrific for the czars and great for their industry suitors, but as the founders would likely agree, it is a pyrrhic victory for America.

David Sirota is an author and syndicated columnist. Contact us at insight@sfchronicle.com.

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