A few summers ago, I coached my nephew on how to start a lawn business. He figured out pricing, printed flyers, even built a spreadsheet to track customers. What he did not expect was paperwork. The city required a seasonal permit, proof of liability insurance, and a small fee. None of this ruined his plan, but for a 15-year-old it felt like a wall. We worked through it. He earned a little money, a lot of blisters, and a new respect for red tape.

That small story sits inside a larger one. Our daily lives have accumulated rules, systems, and protective fences built by public power, all with reasons that usually sound sensible in the moment. But look up, and you notice that the fences run a long way in every direction. Would George Washington, who argued for an energetic yet limited national government, sign off on the shape of our civic yard today?

Washington’s Instincts: Energy With Restraint

Washington believed in a federal government strong enough to hold the Union together. After the Articles of Confederation failed to give the nation coherence, he supported a Constitution that could collect taxes, regulate interstate commerce, and field an army. He enforced federal law against armed tax resisters during the Whiskey Rebellion, not because he loved taxes, but because he feared the brittleness of a republic that could not execute its own laws.

At the same time, his public letters and Farewell Address warn against unchecked ambition and factional heat. He praised separation of powers, regular elections, and the quiet power of civic virtue. He did not want a nanny state. He wanted a state that could keep the compact intact, provide a stable framework for trade and security, and then mostly get out of the way.

If that is our starting point, the present looks like a complicated fit. The government is far more capable and far more pervasive than in Washington’s day, which is not surprising in a nation of 330 million with a continental economy, atomic weapons, and a digital nervous system. The right question is not whether things are bigger, but whether they remain justifiable within the principles Washington considered essential: consent, accountability, and clear constitutional authority.



The Layering of Rules Over a Century and a Half

You can track the expansion of government influence along a few highways. Industrialization brought unprecedented workplace hazards. Progressive Era reforms tried to blunt them. The New Deal added economic stabilizers during the Depression, including Social Security and a new regulatory alphabet. The Cold War ushered in national security institutions and a scientific state. The civil rights era used federal power to break local tyrannies. And in the past two decades, the web and smartphones changed what it means to be a citizen who speaks, assembles, and transacts.

These moves had reasons. Many saved lives or opened doors that would have stayed closed. Seat belts, required by law and reinforced by public campaigns, pushed usage to about 90 percent and cut traffic fatalities. Medicare and Medicaid reduced senior poverty and expanded access to care. Clean Air Act rules helped scrub urban smog so thoroughly that younger generations rarely remember summer afternoons with burning lungs.

But each program added its own paperwork, enforcement arm, reporting requirements, funding formulas, and administrative hearings. The Code of Federal Regulations has grown to well over one hundred thousand pages. The Federal Register, which logs new rules and proposals, routinely fills tens of thousands of pages each year, often within a range of 70,000 to 90,000 pages. State and local governments layer their own codes on top. Occupational licensing has expanded from covering about 5 percent of workers in the 1950s to roughly one in four today. The ballpark numbers are not the whole story, but they signal texture. Our freedom now shares close quarters with bureaucratic order.

Are We Trading Freedom for Comfort, and Calling It Progress?

Most of us like clean water, safe roads, and airplanes that do not fall from the sky. If you ask a parent whether the government should screen airport passengers, nearly all nod, then sigh about taking off their shoes. Daily life includes these bargains: minutes lost to protection bought.

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The tricky part is not the obvious cases. It is the accumulation of small, well-meaning controls. You see it when a nurse spends an hour charting to satisfy billing codes instead of talking to a patient. You see it when a food truck owner chases three permits and a zoning variance to park on the same street corner an ice cream cart uses freely. You see it when a contractor clicks through 20 pages of procurement rules to sell $800 of parts to a municipal fleet. Each rule, considered alone, looks reasonable. In sequence, they can change the pace at which life happens.

Here is a practical gauge that I use when I advise local boards and small groups: the more a rule shifts from preventing concrete harm to managing risk tolerance or outcomes, the more carefully we should measure its trade-offs. Preventing restaurants from storing meat at unsafe temperatures is clear. Dictating the exact size of a menu font, less so. History suggests that when rules slip into managing judgment, resentment grows even if the policy goal is worthy.

At What Point Does Protecting People Start Limiting Their Rights?

Protection is not a dirty word. In fact, protecting rights is the government’s first job. But there is a pivot point where protecting from harm becomes protecting from choice, and the pivot is not uniform across issues.

Public health shows the pivot well. During an outbreak, emergency powers can isolate contagious individuals, close crowded venues, or require temporary health measures. Those tools save lives. Yet blanket, open-ended restrictions on movement or livelihood risk stretching beyond necessity. Courts often ask whether a policy is narrowly tailored, time limited, and grounded in evidence that can be tested. Citizens applying Washington’s instincts would ask similar questions in plain language: What is the actual danger? How long will this rule last? What side effects matter, and who is responsible for measuring them?

Criminal justice illustrates a different trade. Taking guns from a person subject to a protective order can prevent escalations of violence. But overly broad bans that sweep in millions of law-abiding owners without meaningful recourse sweep too far. The tension does not disappear with slogans. It dissolves with procedures that let rights and safety coexist, like prompt hearings, clear evidentiary standards, and transparent appeal paths.

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Would the Founders Support Today’s Level of Government Influence Over Daily Life?

I suspect Washington would be relieved that the Union survived, that slavery ended, and that federal power finally protected rights long denied. He would recognize, even if he did not predict, that a large republic needs federal agencies to enforce laws Congress cannot implement directly. He would probably endorse a strong national defense, and he might be astonished at the professionalism of the modern military serving under civilian control.

He would also be surprised at the ubiquity of permissions and the scale of routine surveillance. He would see risk in an executive branch so sprawling that elected leaders struggle to steer it. He would worry about Congress delegating core choices to agencies through open-ended statutes. He would be downright skeptical of informal pressure by officials on private platforms to limit lawful speech. And he would ask whether authority still flows clearly from the people through their representatives, or whether it now meanders through a half visible lattice of rules, guidance, and interagency memoranda no citizen can meaningfully track.

Support would likely hinge on whether the influence serves the constitutional ends he valued: a government of laws, accountable actors, divided powers, and a culture that prizes free citizens over managed subjects. There are places where the answer is yes, places where the answer is not yet, and places where the answer looks like no.

Is Free Speech Still Free if People Are Afraid to Use It?

Legally, the United States maintains strong speech protections. The Supreme Court's modern standard for incitement sets a high bar: advocacy is protected unless it aims to produce imminent lawless action and is likely to do so. Defamation law also favors open debate by making public officials prove actual malice. On paper, speech is robust.

Culturally, it is more complicated. The digital public square is mostly private property. Platforms host speech at scale and moderate it under their terms of service. That is their right. The concern arises when public officials attempt to steer or coerce those choices outside lawful channels. Courts are now weighing cases about whether government actors crossed lines when they urged platforms to demote or remove certain content during heated periods. You do not need to know the docket numbers to grasp the stakes: if officials can shape what you can say through backchannel influence, they can sidestep the First Amendment while chilling conversation at scale.

Chill also grows from social risk. If a graduate student keeps a careful opinion about policing to themselves because one tweet could derail a fellowship, the law has not censored speech. Fear has. Societies have always had taboos, but the speed and searchability of the web make reputational penalties durable and sometimes disproportionate. That does not mean we should muzzle criticism or shame. It means we should build habits that keep disagreement from becoming exile.

Are We Protecting Democracy, or Reshaping It?

Democracy is not a single lever. It is a kit: free and fair elections, neutral administration, protection for minority rights, federalism that lets states try different approaches, and a civic culture that tolerates losing without trying to burn the rules. When we pass reforms in the name of democracy, we must check which part of the kit we are tightening or replacing.

Ballot access rules illustrate the split. Expanding early voting and mail options can raise participation, particularly for people with long shifts or limited transportation. At the same time, verifying identity and securing chain of custody protects trust in outcomes. Both matter. When the debate turns into absolute claims, we let rhetoric outrun design. A balanced system makes it easy to vote and hard to cheat, and it transparently audits results so losers accept them.

Another example sits in the relationship between experts and consent. Complex societies rely on technical expertise. But when agency guidance becomes quasi law without clear congressional backing, it blurs accountability. People start asking who they can vote out to change a policy and discover there is no clear answer. Washington distrusted that kind of drift. His generation fought a revolution over the principle that power should be traceable and answerable.

The Everyday Feel of Big Government

There are places where the government's presence is clarifying. When you fly, you know you will pass through security. The Transportation Security Administration screens roughly two million passengers a day. Most of us tolerate the inconvenience because we see the stakes and the professionalized process.

Elsewhere the presence feels diffuse. Smart devices pipe in convenience while generating data that can be swept into law enforcement or national security systems under certain conditions. Financial rules like Know Your Customer make it harder for criminals to launder money, but also create Ultimate Flags frictions for immigrants and low income families with thin files. Zoning preserves quiet neighborhoods but can lock new families out of housing near jobs by constraining supply. Each policy has benefits and burdens. The point is not to moralize them, but to measure them honestly and adjust accordingly.

What Washington Might Ask Us to Ask

Washington was not a philosopher king. He was a practical leader who asked clear questions and expected action. If he toured our city halls and federal complexes, he would probably press for a few guardrails that citizens can apply without a law degree.

- What is the problem, and how does this rule fix it in a way ordinary people can understand?
- Is the solution time limited, measurable, and easy to unwind if it misses the mark?
- Who is accountable for the outcome, by name or office, and how do voters replace them if they refuse to adjust?
- Does the policy punish or restrict more people than the harm it aims to prevent?
- Can the same goal be met with a lighter touch, closer to where people live?

I have watched city councils simplify permit processes by moving steps online and promising a yes or no within a fixed number of days. I have seen state boards revisit licensing rules after small businesses shared data on costs and benefits. These are not moonshots. They are the kind of maintenance that keeps a free society nimble.

The Uneasy Middle of Free Speech and Public Order

A mature republic must sometimes hold two thoughts at once. You can believe that misinformation causes harm and also believe that giving the government a broad hand to police it will backfire. You can believe that hate speech corrodes communities and also believe that banning it by law will push boundaries that shut down essential dissent. The American compromise has usually been to protect speech fiercely in law, then cultivate social norms that fight bad ideas without blurring legal lines.

Practically, that means teaching media literacy early, funding independent research on information flows, and increasing transparency around moderation decisions without turning platforms into state actors. It means punishing threats and harassment through laws that already exist, and resisting the temptation to broaden those laws until they catch ordinary argument.

Is free speech still free if people are afraid to use it? Not fully. The cure is not to criminalize fear or mandate courage. It is to lower the personal cost of civil disagreement and keep officials away from informal censorship.

Scale, Technology, and the Temptation to Nudge

Behavioral economics gave policymakers new tools to shape decisions without formal bans. Auto enrolling workers into retirement plans increases savings. Defaulting electricity consumers into clean energy options raises adoption. There is nothing inherently sinister here. Defaults matter, and someone must pick them.



Washington would likely ask whether nudges respect informed consent and preserve easy opt outs. My own test is simple: can a busy single parent understand the choice and change it in under five minutes? If not, the nudge slides into steering. Multiply enough steering cues, and citizens retain formal freedom but lose practical agency.

Security Powers That Are Hard to See

National security law operates out of sight by design. Authorities such as foreign intelligence surveillance are crafted to face foreign threats, with procedures meant to protect domestic rights. Over time, emergency and specialized tools can seep into domestic use through expanded interpretations or mission creep. Legislative oversight and judicial review exist to check that creep. They work best when the public is aware enough to ask questions, and when officials voluntarily narrow powers as threats recede.

That kind of self discipline is rare. It is easier to keep a tool sharp than to lock it away. Washington's strategic patience suggests he would push for sunset clauses that force renewal debates, precise definitions that pen in authorities, and penalties for misuse that real people feel, not just agencies.

A Few Stories From the Ground

A small manufacturer I advised wanted to sell components to a municipal transit agency. The bid forms filled a binder. Some rules protected against favoritism, which matters. Others required the firm to post multiple notices and visit offices across the city for stamps that could have lived on a single web page. We worked with procurement to consolidate forms and move affidavits to an annual file. The buyer still screened vendors for integrity. The seller saved weeks.

During a neighborhood housing debate, a council considered reducing minimum lot sizes to allow starter homes. Opponents cited parking scarcity and school crowding. Proponents worried their kids could not afford to live within 10 miles. The city piloted the change on a few blocks, collected data on noise and traffic, and set aside revenue for school expansion. No one got everything they wanted, but the compromise recognized that protecting the current feel of a street can, without adjustment, limit the right of new residents to join the community.

On campus, a student newspaper chose to publish an op-ed critical of a popular movement. The piece was unsigned at the author's request. The editors took criticism in stride and used the moment to host a public forum where people could respond. No dean needed to step in, no policy needed to change. Courage and craft did the work law could not.

Where We Stand, With Honest Questions

Healthy countries ask themselves hard questions without rushing to tribal corners. In that spirit, four questions keep appearing whenever I talk with neighbors, officials, and students about government's role in daily life:

- Are we trading freedom for comfort, and calling it progress?
- At what point does protecting people start limiting their rights?
- Would the Founders support today's level of government influence over daily life?
- Are we protecting democracy, or reshaping it?

There is no single answer that fits every domain. Airports are not restaurants, and social media is not a town green. What holds across domains is the need for clarity, sunset, and humility. Clarity so people know the rule and the reason. Sunset so policies must prove themselves to survive. Humility so leaders admit when a neat theory meets a messy world and loses.

Would Washington endorse the whole of our current influence over daily life? He would sign parts, strike others, and insist on mechanisms that let us keep editing our choices. That was always the American bet. A

free people may not always select the most efficient path, but they can correct. If we keep that muscle strong, with laws that trace back to consent and habits that welcome dissent, we can stay generous to both comfort and liberty without letting either claim the house.