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Nation's libertarian roots

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David Boaz is executive vice president of the Cato Institute and author of "The Libertarian Mind"

Where better than Philadelphia on Presidents' Day to talk about liberty and reviving the American tradition of freedom and limited government.

Thomas Jefferson said that when he wrote the Declaration of Independence in June of 1776, he had no book or pamphlet at hand but simply set down "an expression of the American mind." With its foundation on the equal and inalienable rights of all people, including life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, the Declaration also reflects the libertarian mind.

Indeed, the principles of the Declaration are so closely associated with libertarianism that the Chinese edition of my previous book, *Libertarianism: A Primer*, features a cover photograph of the famous room in Independence Hall, complete with Windsor chairs and green tablecloths.

Libertarianism is the philosophy of freedom. It has, in different form throughout history, inspired people who fought for freedom, dignity, and individual rights - the early advocates of religious tolerance, the opponents of absolute monarchy, the American revolutionaries, the abolitionists, antiwar advocates and anti-imperialists, opponents of National Socialism and communism.

Libertarians believe in the presumption of liberty, that is, that people ought to be free to live as they choose unless advocates of coercion can make a compelling case. It's the exercise of power, not the exercise of freedom, that requires justification. The burden of proof ought to be on those who want to limit our freedom.

We should be free to live our lives as we choose so long as we respect the equal rights of others. The presumption of liberty should be as strong as the presumption of innocence in a criminal trial, for the same reason. Just as you can't prove your innocence of all possible charges against you, you cannot justify all of the ways in which you should be allowed to act. If we followed the presumption of liberty, our lives would be freer, more prosperous, and more satisfying.

America is a country fundamentally shaped by libertarian values and attitudes.

Throughout our history, most voters and movements have agreed on the fundamentals of classical liberalism or libertarianism: free speech, religious freedom, equality before the law, private property, free markets, limited government, and individual rights. The broad acceptance of those values means that American liberals and conservatives are fighting within a libertarian

consensus. We sometimes forget just how libertarian the American political culture is. But social scientists know.

In their book *It Didn't Happen Here: Why Socialism Failed in the United States*, the sociologists Seymour Martin Lipset and Gary Marks write, "The American ideology, stemming from the Revolution, can be subsumed in five words: antistatism, laissez-faire, individualism, populism, and egalitarianism." Similarly, Samuel Huntington of Harvard wrote, "Prevailing ideas of the American creed have included liberalism, individualism, equality, constitutionalism, rights against the state. They have been opposed to hierarchy, discipline, government, organization, and specialization."

Reflecting those ideas, especially as laid out in the Declaration, the founders created a Constitution of delegated, enumerated, and thus limited powers. Unfortunately, as Georgetown law professor Randy Barnett has written, "what was once a system of islands of powers in a sea of individual liberty rights at both the state and the national levels, has become islands of rights in a sea of state and federal power."

As government has exceeded its constitutional powers, there has been a remarkable surge in libertarian thinking. A series of CNN polls found that total support for a combination of libertarian positions had risen 30 percent between 2002 and 2012. Journalists now talk about a libertarian faction in Congress and in the electorate. Libertarian organizations are booming.

And no wonder. In the last few years politicians have given us many reasons to doubt the wisdom and efficacy of big, activist government. Endless wars. Economic collapse. Corporate bailouts. The highest government spending and national debt ever. An unimaginable level of spying on citizens.

I believe that the simple, timeless principles of the American Revolution - individual liberty, limited government, and free markets - are even more powerful and more important in the world of instant communication, global markets, and unprecedented access to information, a world that Jefferson or Madison could not have imagined. Libertarianism is the essential framework for a future of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.