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How Clinton and Trump betray the Fourth of July

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On the Fourth of July, we celebrate a generation of Americans who rejected an oppressive government in favor of a limited one based on individual rights. After winning our independence they devised a governing charter, the Constitution, which explicitly limited government and outlined fundamental rights that would belong to all citizens.

Today we have Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump running for president of the United States, who, in different ways, favor oppressive government particularly in how each seeks to diminish some of our most basic constitutional rights.

It would probably take a book to describe all the ways. But in this short column, here are some recent examples.

Investors Business Daily published an editorial last week titled “Democrats Attack 3 of the 10 Amendments in the Bill of Rights,” citing the party and its nominee Hillary Clinton’s efforts to deny basic due process, firearm and free speech rights.

IBD notes of Democrats’ recent efforts to void the Second Amendment rights of American citizens who end up on terrorist watch lists, “denying everyone on this list the right to buy a gun would risk denying them due process, a protection guaranteed by the 5th Amendment, which says among other things that no one can ‘be deprived of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law.’”

Even the American Civil Liberties Union, an organization that supports gun control (“We believe that the right to own and use guns is not absolute or free from government regulation...” read an ACLU statement) opposes the constitutional infringement efforts by the Democrats (“At the same time, regulation of firearms and individual gun ownership or use must be consistent with civil liberties principles, such as due process, equal protection, freedom from unlawful searches, and privacy,” continued the ACLU).

While gun advocates might quibble with the ACLU over why the 2nd Amendment can be amended but not the 5th, the primary point is Clinton and her party are eager to deny some of our most elementary due process rights, fundamentally essential to basic U.S. citizenship.

Perhaps ironically, these civil liberties are also something Democrats demanded President George W. Bush respect when Republicans spearheaded the Patriot Act after 9/11. This eagerness to sap constitutional protections has long been bipartisan.

Which brings us to Donald Trump.

Reason's Damon Root wrote of Trump in December, "it's getting hard to keep track of his seemingly endless attacks on basic constitutional principles."

"To date, Trump has trashed the First Amendment by calling for the closing of mosques, he has trashed the Fifth Amendment by endorsing unlimited eminent domain power for government officials, and he has trashed the 14th Amendment as part of his campaign to suppress immigration," Root noted.

"Now Trump is trashing the bedrock principles of religious liberty, due process, and equal protection by calling for a 'total and complete shutdown' of Muslims entering the United States," Root added.

Some worry a Trump presidency would undermine the most basic precepts of U.S. law. Regarding ever-expanding executive power, Ilya Shapiro of the libertarian Cato Institute asks with reasonable concern, "Who knows what Donald Trump with a pen and phone would do?"

On this front, the primary distinction between Clinton and Trump is in the different ways they would take our basic protections away. Both reject constitutional fundamentals as even being fundamental.

Clinton and Trump are not the first potential or actual presidents to behave this way. Many partisan champions of either candidate might also argue that what they want to do isn't particularly extreme or oppressive in the context of various threats we face. Of course, some pundits today even argue that the British Empire wasn't all that oppressive either and that the colonists overreacted.

But the point is the colonists felt they were being oppressed — and they acted. Many today look at the agendas of Clinton and Trump and see different brands of authoritarianism — and fear both.

They should.

In the 240 years since we declared our independence, America has meant different things to many different generations, and that is perhaps truer today in a country of 300 million coming from so many diverse backgrounds.

But what has remained constant is our unique government founded on the inalienable rights of all citizens. Take that away, and you gut what made American independence matter. Take away liberty, and you essentially take away what has made us truly free for our entire history.

Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump both want to be president. Both also undermine what made America great in the first place.