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# Degeneration of Democracy

By Thomas Sowell

When Adolf Hitler was building up the Nazi movement in the 1920s, leading up to his taking power in the 1930s, he deliberately sought to activate people who did not normally pay much attention to politics. Such people were a valuable addition to his political base, since they were particularly susceptible to Hitler's rhetoric and had far less basis for questioning his assumptions or his conclusions.

"Useful idiots" was the term supposedly coined by V.I. Lenin to describe similarly unthinking supporters of his dictatorship in the Soviet Union.

Put differently, a democracy needs informed citizens if it is to thrive, or ultimately even survive. In our times, American democracy is being dismantled, piece by piece, before our very eyes by the current administration in Washington, and few people seem to be concerned about it.

The president's poll numbers are going down because increasing numbers of people disagree with particular policies of his, but the damage being done to the fundamental structure of this nation goes far beyond particular counterproductive policies.

Just where in the Constitution of the United States does it say that a president has the authority to extract vast sums of money from a private enterprise and distribute it as he sees fit to whomever he deems worthy of compensation? Nowhere.

And yet that is precisely what is happening with a \$20 billion fund to be provided by BP to compensate people harmed by their oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico. Many among the public and in the media may think that the issue is simply whether BP's oil spill has damaged many people, who ought to be compensated. But our government is supposed to be "a government of laws and not of men." If our laws and our institutions determine that BP ought to pay \$20 billion-- or \$50 billion or \$100 billion-- then so be it.

But the Constitution says that private property is not to be confiscated by the government without "due process of law." Technically, it has not been confiscated by Barack Obama, but that is a distinction without a difference.

With vastly expanded powers of government available at the discretion of politicians and bureaucrats, private individuals and organizations can be forced into accepting the imposition of powers that were never granted to the government by the Constitution.

If you believe that the end justifies the means, then you don't believe in Constitutional government. And, without Constitutional government, freedom cannot endure. There will always be a "crisis"-- which, as the president's chief of staff has said, cannot be allowed to "go to waste" as an opportunity to expand the government's power.

That power will of course not be confined to BP or to the particular period of crisis that gave rise to the use of that power, much less to the particular issues.

When Franklin D. Roosevelt arbitrarily took the United States off the gold standard, he cited a law passed during the First World War to prevent trading with the country's wartime enemies. But there was no war when FDR ended the gold standard's restrictions on the printing of money.

At about the same time, during the worldwide Great Depression, the German Reichstag passed a law "for the relief of the German people." That law gave Hitler dictatorial powers that were used for things going far beyond the relief of the German people-- indeed, powers that ultimately brought a rain of destruction down on the German people and on others.

If the agreement with BP was an isolated event, perhaps we might hope that it would not be a precedent. But there is nothing isolated about it.

The man appointed by President Obama to dispense BP's money as the administration sees fit, to whomever it sees fit, is only the latest in a long line of presidentially appointed "czars" controlling different parts of the economy, without even having to be confirmed by the Senate, as Cabinet members are.

Those who cannot see beyond the immediate events to the issues of arbitrary power-- versus the rule of law and the preservation of freedom-- are the "useful idiots" of our time. But useful to whom?