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# In A Word: Institution

The more we complain the more institutions will claim to address our complaints.

Institutions spring to life for any number of reasons; but once living *all* institutions strive to stay alive and do whatever else they do only to that end. Unlike other living things however, institutions are incapable of humility, restraint, or self-sacrifice. And when we complain that government, or public schools, or the legal system, etc., are failing, it is because we don't understand the nature of institutions. Institutions succeed and grow as a consequence of complaints against them. In fact, the more we complain the more power and wealth institutions will claim in order to address our complaints.

And in America—an exceptional country dedicated to individual freedom, individual rights, and private ownership of property—institutions make this most menacing and contradictory claim.

Institutions, we are told, must have the authority to claim individual freedom, individual rights, and private property in order to foster individual freedom, individual rights, and private property.

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This claim is dangerous nonsense and it's not new. Thomas Jefferson addressed it directly in 1816, "The functionaries of every government have propensities to command at will the liberty and property of their constituents. There is no safe deposit for these but with the people themselves..."

Jefferson understood the menacing danger inherent in institutions. And Jefferson knew, as *did America's earliest functionaries*, that *the* specific responsibility of "the people" is to simultaneously keep institutions at arms length and under foot. Today's functionaries think that too don't they? Well, don't they?

Imagine you are a functionary of this or that institution in whom there grows the desire to claim, for whatever supposedly good purpose, the individual freedom and private property of the people. Which would you rather face, those with or without long arms and strong feet?

People so endowed will require proof that your actions will, in the end, generate more individual freedom and private property than that which is destroyed. They will review your previous actions to determine if you have done so in the past. They will look back in history to a time when America's institutions were much smaller and much less powerful, and utterly fail to identify instances when people were in need and were left to go derelict. Most concerning to you as functionary, people will, after doing these things, be far less willing to accept the next desire of yours that comes along.

Conversely, people with short arms and weak feet are easily manipulated by slogans, appeals to the common good, and vague promises of a better life. As functionary you may find these people useful. You may seek them out and tailor your actions to ensure their numbers grow. You may even consider it the primary task of all functionaries everywhere to do so. This behavior is not only perfectly possible, it's perfectly real.

But that is not the worst of it. The worst of it is, functionaries assume what is wholly beyond the scope of human achievement: *a total and superior understanding of individual human beings by other individual human beings*. Humans lack that ability. Humans have always lacked that ability. And all the pursuits, of all the functionaries, of all the institutions in the land, cannot achieve it.

**Work Cited**

Thomas Jefferson to Charles Yancey, January 6, 1816 , from The Works of Thomas Jefferson in Twelve Volumes. Federal Edition. Collected and Edited by Paul Leicester Ford.

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