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POST REVOLUTIONARY GOVERNMENT IN AMERICA AND IN THE BALTIC STATES

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It is often easier to achieve independence than to create effective independent states. This was the experience of the United States, which operated under the inadequate Articles of Confederation from 1783 to 1789 and then suffered through a decade of partisan politics so difficult that many patriots despaired of the nation's survival. So it is today in the Baltic states.

One problem common to Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania today is the creation of effective parliamentary majorities. One should not be surprised that personal ambitions, personality clashes, and ideological differences have shattered the unity which common danger imposed upon independence leaders earlier. Human behavior is that way; democratic government just makes it more public. It happened in America in the 1790s with the formation of the Republican and Federalists parties, whose leaders, Hamilton and Jefferson, hated each other with such a passion that President Washington warned of the dangers of party loyalty in his Farewell Address. The existence of proportional representation in the Baltic States helps limit the ability of the more extreme viewpoints coming to dominate debate as it did in America, but it also makes the process of creating a legislative majority more difficult. Add to this the perceived need to avoid alienating any significant block of the majority population — as was the case when Jefferson wanted to insert in the Declaration of Independence a condemnation of slavery, the other committeemen believed that raising the matter would threaten the unity of the cause — and political stalemate over vital issues becomes inevitable.

A second problem is the lack of political experience in democratic procedures. In fact, western democratic procedures are not always so "democratic" as pragmatic, the opposite of an idealistic position which equates compromise as selling out the revolution. America was extremely fortunate in this respect. We Americans made our Revolution to defend traditional practices, not to reacquire long-disused rights or gain new ones. Even so, Jefferson and Thomas Paine took hard ideological positions, abusing their opponents mercilessly in speeches and in the press; and John Adams readily supported the Alien and Sedition Acts in hopes of shutting them up.

Lastly, the Baltic economic problems complicate the politicians' tasks. Every choice has so many unfortunate side effects that substantial groups object to every proposed policy. Surely, many people think, we can make all these transitions reasonably painlessly and fairly. The American War for Independence, too, was followed by economic woes. It was a wrenching experience for Americans who had grown used to the protection of mercantile system to suddenly find themselves competing against the entire world economically. The government was too weak to protect American interests even when the political parties could agree a problem existed. For many years we paid tribute to the Barbary pirates and to some Indian tribes, and Washington's negotiators over the withdrawal of British troops from American soil were so deferential to Great Britain that the public outrage reached fever pitch. Moreover, there were vicious debates over economic policy. Jefferson argued that in order to create political democracy, it was necessary to create economic democracy; that one couldn't create economic democracy from a political center.

The American people were not united in 1783 or for many years thereafter — there were many people who had supported the British in the war for Independence; some wanted a stable government which would protect property rights, while others wanted a redistribution of the tax burden and the opening of new opportunities for the common man; and many states wanted a very weak federal government. America had men who were not afraid to misuse the new liberty of the press to attack their opponents with little restraint or even regard for the truth. Some were corrupt, others ambitious, and a few incompetent. The British colonies were now closed to American trade, and products sold in Britain were heavily taxed; there was a war debt, no industry, and no government apparatus for collecting the few taxes which the states could agree upon. Nevertheless, the United States survived. How did this happen?

First, America was fortunate in having as president after 1789 George Washington, a man who was trusted for his impartiality, integrity, and competence. Washington selected as his cabinet men of ability regardless of their political orientation. Trying to make Hamilton and Jefferson work together was a daily trial to him, but he kept the country together and used their talents for the common good. Washington did not escape criticism for this — he was vilified by the press for failing to follow the ideological line each editor preferred. But his pragmatic employment of men was wise. Washington valued proven ability. One of the important legacies of Washington and his time is that Americans tend to look at what a person can do, not what his past was.

Secondly, America had a philosophy of government which discounted ideology. Best described in *The Federalist Papers*, it said that good government had to be founded not on ideals or education, but on self-interest. Only when people saw their own interests affected by government would they act to protect it — or use it. This means that Americans habitually form combinations to pass laws for the benefits of groups. It may look corrupt and be condemned by those who lose out in the competition, but it results in stimulating those not benefited into political activity for their own protection. It also gets things done.

Americans of the Revolutionary era had considerable tolerance for pragmatic deal-making. This tradition survives even today despite so many denunciations of government. Americans reading history understand instinctively how Henry VIII saved the Protestant Reformation in England by giving lands to the nobles, many of whom were his enemies; by thus corrupting them, he eliminated them as a counter-revolutionary threat. American politicians know how to deal with personal and party enemies in this same manner. They do not work on the basis of absolute trust, but on trusting the perceived self-interest of their opponents.

Lastly, Americans relied on the free market for economic opportunities. They knew the many problems associated with an unregulated economy, but they mistrusted the self-interest of those who would have to draw up and enforce regulations. After all, somebody had to appoint the officials, and whichever party was in power could be counted upon to further its goals through the bureaucracy as much as through lawmaking.

Are there lessons the Baltic States can learn from this? Yes, perhaps, as long as we remember that every historical situation is unique and that no one example can serve as perfect blueprint for another.

(1) Judging individuals by their present behavior and their future self-interest, ignoring as much as possible their past, will broaden the political consensus necessary for the survival of a democratic process and a free market economy. It will take exceptional leaders to implement such a policy, because harsh criticism can be expected when the first ex-communist or KGB informant is put into an important office. But there may be a Talleyrand or Metternick there, and most managers and bureaucrats were, necessarily, members of the communist party. Accepting the fact that these people still hold important jobs and want to protect the houses, cars, and jobs they acquired will be politically difficult, but it may be necessary to keep them from counter-revolutionary activities. What must be demanded of these individuals is performance. They must demonstrate the ability to work effectively like anyone else. Their current advantageous positions should be considered a temporary head-start, not a permanent guarantee of power.

(2) A free market will eliminate those opportunities for corruption and crime which the Mafias are now exploiting; the present system of controls will inevitably result in scandals which will undermine public confidence in the democratic process. A functioning free market will also reduce the subsidies which form a great part of the national budgets. Attempts to regulate commerce in defiance of world market prices will only create smugglers, black marketers, and cynics. And, in the end, it probably won't work. If a giant police state couldn't make a go of it, what chance do small democracies have?

3) Cooperation with the other states is essential for survival. As late as 1783 the newly-independent states in America resisted making commitments to one another; by 1787, they realized that a stronger union was necessary. The Articles of Confederation were too loose for America to prosper, but they were far tighter than anything joining the Baltic States together today.

4) The Baltic States have to make their own decisions. Advice from the great powers, however well-intentioned, is almost certain to be less than fully informed and never free from ideological and political overtones. Even historical analogies by western professors of history must be read with caution.