



SECTION 1

The United States of America was born in an explosion of rebellion against authority. The Declaration of Independence, defending that rebellion, spit forth a list of all the British monarch's crimes against the American colonies. Clearly, many colonists had lost faith in the British government—if not in government in general. In his widely read pamphlet *Common Sense*, the colonial firebrand Thomas Paine expressed a viewpoint held by many colonial Americans:

Society in every state [condition] is a blessing, but Government, even in its best state, is but a necessary evil; in its worst state, an intolerable one.

—Thomas Paine, *Common Sense*, 1776

This general mistrust of government did not end with the American victory in the Revolutionary War. It continues to this day. In 2011, more than a thousand Americans were asked this question in an opinion poll sponsored by two news organizations, CNN and ORC International: *How much of the time do you think you can trust the government in Washington to do what is right: just about always, most of the time, or only some of the time?*

Only 2 percent, or 1 person in 50, answered, “just about always.” 13 percent responded, “most of the time.” About three fourths answered, “only some of the time.” And a disgruntled 8 percent said, “never.”



This distrust of government also shows up in popular movies and television dramas. Corrupt or power-hungry politicians are often the villains in action movies. The plot lines of some television shows center on conspiracies hatched by public officials at the highest levels of government. Conspiracy theories about government involvement in the assassinations of President John F. Kennedy and civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. continue to generate books and magazine articles even today.

Is this attitude that politicians and government in general cannot be trusted justified? Is government at its best, in the words of Thomas Paine, “a necessary evil”? Or is it necessary at all? To answer these questions, we must first figure out what government is and what it does. One way to begin is to examine the central concern of all governments: power.