

Why I Detest the State



Guest post by Clem Johnson. Originally published in The Voluntaryist, February, 1987.

About a year before he died, Albert Einstein wrote this warning: “The unleashed power of the atom has changed everything save our modes of thinking, and we thus drift toward unparalleled catastrophies.”

In paraphrase, such a statement could describe even dire consequences: “From tribalism to republic, man has tried every kind of *archy* conceivable, with one outcome in common: *each* has degenerated to chaos and tyranny. *Man has ‘changed everything save his modes of thinking,’* and thus drifts incorrigibly into recurring disaster.”

Man acts in accordance with his deepest convictions as he perceives them, wrote my late mentor, Robert LeFevre. If that is true, our convictions are extremely important, for they guide our actions, and thus what we *believe* literally affects the *freedom of others*. I am persuaded that a conviction worth keeping is a conviction worth testing and articulating, for thereby we may construct a morally sound, consistent philosophy to live by.

A few moons ago, in the company of very intelligent people, I heard some rather astonishing convictions. The host wound me up by asking what I thought of the northern California “land-for-drugs” seizure. It is apparent many people favor such seizure by government, so I choose this opportunity to tell you why libertarians do not.

You should know it is because I love my country that I loathe its government, in all its forms, for a host of reasons. How I don’t just despise government because it is wasteful, arrogant and immoral. I don’t hate it solely because it is coercive and legally *steals for its livelihood*. It is true that I abhor government because it cloaks its crimes with euphemisms: It *robs*, but calls it “taxation”; it *defrauds*, but calls it “social security”; it *kidnaps*, but calls it “busing”; it *enslaves*, but calls it “conscription”; and it *counterfeits*, but calls it “inflation.” It does the very things *I cannot do without committing crimes*, but do you know why I *really detest* government? (I thought you would never ask.)

It is because of what government has done to my friends, and has much to do with what Karl Hess has termed “the most pernicious institution in the United States today: the public

school system.” Now he didn’t just say that because so many high school seniors read at a fourth grade level, have difficulty filling out a job application, or trouble making simple change in the market place. He said that because *there* is where government transforms fine, young, mental timber into petrified, apologetic *tools of the state*: so that they will stand mindlessly and pledge allegiance to a piece of cloth, with 50 stars for 50 percent taxation, and *think* they are *free*; so that they will lend their lives as cannon fodder around the globe whenever *El Presidente* goes on the warpath, all in the name of peace, you understand; so that they will *lock step* behind officials of state in a *myriad* of assaults on human liberty, and cry out with the multitude, Crucify! Crucify! *That’s why I loathe government* because of what it has done to my friends!

Thanks to everyday, political forays of interwoven theft, the typical American on the street today wouldn’t recognize a *property right* if it batted him in the face. Consequently he can’t even make a *moral decision*, but looks to church and state for a determination of right or wrong. Even then he has trouble: He goes to church on Sunday morning, gives lip service to the Eighth Commandment, Thou shall not steal (PERIOD), and then goes to the polls on Tuesday evening, where he *abandons* his tenet, and expropriates his neighbors capital with the stroke of a punch as though he owned it! And then he says, “I didn’t take my neighbors’ capital, *government* did it!” But government did it with *his authorization, his license*. Indeed the most *devastating problem* of this *century* is not drugs, is not terrorism, is not nuclear weapons; instead it is *utter, rampant, contemptible violation of property right*, and therein is the *root of ALL conflict*!

Libertarian actions have a common criterion: “See that one is not a thief.” Ladies and gentlemen of good will, that I know you to be, if you would live in peace and harmony with others of your species, that principle is not just a convenient option; it is an absolute *obligation* on your part: See that you are not a thief, directly or *indirectly via government*, in any manner, for any reason.

Is this a new concept? Certainly not. Consider two early American coins: a continental, silver dollar, minted in 1775 and the Franklin penny, coined in 1787. Each coin was inscribed with the message: “*Mind your business.*” I submit that a healthy respect for property right is among the *oldest* of American traditions.

Now let us put this lesson to the test. I may not relish the fact that my neighbor is growing a crop of marijuana, but *I don’t own his property*, and it is *his property right to grow any crop he wants*. Certainly it is *not my right to steal control of his property* to have it otherwise. By the same token, it is *not the right of a majority* of neighbors, or *government as a substitute*, to *intervene either*! We don’t have to buy his drug crop. The same lesson applies to Nicaragua, Libya, Lebanon, Iran and the Union of South Africa. When you *own the property there, then and only then*, may you *morally determine* what happens there. Until that time, please, in order that freedom might flourish, mind your business!

I want to conclude with inspiration of that brilliant, nineteenth century logician, philosopher, and economist, Frederic Bastiat:

The question of legal plunder must be settled once and for all, and there are only three ways to settle it:

- 1. The few plunder the many. (That's how governments get started.)*
- 2. Everybody plunders everybody. (That's where we are today.)*
- 3. Nobody plunders anybody. (That's the creative way of life.) No legal plunder is the principle of justice, peace, order, stability, harmony and logic.*

To Frederic Bastiat, a man alone – and to my family and friends:

a vos sante,
Clem Johnson