

Government is Force

Some pundits really don't understand why libertarians dislike government and therefore want it to do little, if anything at all. Unable to grasp the reason, the pundits assign bad motives to those who disparage government: They don't like poor people, or workers, or the sick, or education.

But what's so hard to understand? Government is significantly different from anything else in society. It is the only institution that can legally threaten and initiate *violence*; that is, under color of law its officers may use physical force, up to and including *lethal* force — not in defense of innocent life but against individuals who have neither threatened nor aggressed against anyone else. "Government is not reason. It is not eloquence," George Washington reportedly said. "Government is force; like fire it is a dangerous servant — and a fearful master."

That's not a controversial description of the State. Even people enthusiastic about government would agree.

Given this unique feature, then, why isn't everyone wary of the State? Whether or not one thinks it's necessary, it's dangerous by its very nature, and we ought to assume it will remain so no matter how many paper checks and balances and bills of rights are thought to contain it.

Yet if you talk about government this way, *you* will be eyed warily and even marginalized. (Observe the current presidential campaign.) This is not confined to just one side of the political spectrum. Progressives and conservatives each have their pet areas where they enthusiastically wish to see the force of government unleashed. Each then regards anyone else's wariness as a defect. So Progressives, who reputedly care about privacy, have no problem, for example, with intrusion into that most personal of matters: medical care. Here they trust power and dismiss rational fears of arbitrary bureaucratic control over health and life. On the other hand, conservatives, who preach freedom and free enterprise, are eager to trust power when the objective is policing the world, hounding unauthorized immigrants, and persecuting manufacturers, merchants, and consumers of unapproved substances.

We are all raised to believe that using force (except in self-defense) is wrong. We're taught not to hit other people or take their things. This applies to our associations as well. Yet as we grow, we are expected to believe that one institution — government — gets to operate by different rules. No one ever explains why.

Tacit Consent

Sure, if you push hard enough, you will hear pseudo explanations. Someone will inevitably

invoke tacit consent. You know: You choose to live here and those are the rules – love it or leave it. But the assertion that we all somehow agreed to be coerced is ludicrous, and Charles Johnson asks if consent is even possible when the withholding of consent is deemed *impossible*.

Moreover this argument implies that the government owns the country, including your property, which begs a big question.

Push harder, and someone will invoke democracy, but again that really gets us nowhere. In my lifetime the only elections have been to determine *who* would run the government, not what its powers, if any, would be. (Yes, candidates sometimes promise to reduce government power, but since one officeholder can't keep such a promise, it's not terribly meaningful.) The fiction of democratic representation is more intended to contain dissent than to describe reality. Let's get real: The average congressional district has more than 600,000 residents. Taxation *with* representation has yet to be realized.

Most people would agree that the sign of an individual's maturity and rationality, not to mention social skills, is her understanding that the cooperation of others must be obtained exclusively through persuasion. If you want something from someone you make an offer or an argument. You don't demand, bully, or terrorize. And yet we tolerate an institution that demands, bullies, and terrorizes as a matter of course across a large and growing range of matters. It doesn't demand merely that we not harm others or take their belongings. It bullies us into turning over our money for all kinds of purposes. It demands that we comply with its (ever-changing) rules about what we consume, how we manage our medical care, and in what manner we trade with others — and whom those others may be. And it increasingly terrorizes us in its brutal crusade against self-medication.

Routinely Hassled

It matters not for my purpose today whether the government's officers think they are looking out for our welfare, indulging their taste for power, or doing the bidding of well-connected and well-heeled interests. The result is the same: We are routinely hassled in our efforts to live, to cooperate, and to mutually benefit one another. *We* are the economy they presume to manage.

Apologists for power will claim that without expansive government, the weak will be vulnerable to the strong, the masses to the rich. But that appeal falls apart when one reviews the history of government and realizes that, appearances aside, power ultimately sides with the strong and the rich against the rest. Indeed, power – what Bastiat called “legal plunder” and shelter from competition — is the source of their strength and a good deal of wealth.

Economic and social theory furnish ample reason for wariness about the State. But we

mustn't let moral theory take a back seat. Government, even when it appears to do good, diminishes our freedom and humanity. How revoltingly ironic that people who claim to champion goodwill and cooperation regard violence as a legitimate means to their ends.