

A Positive Libertarian View of Government

[From *Navigator*]

The Target: Minimalist Government

In recent times, when libertarians have been making some headway in getting their ideas aired in various prominent forums and published by respectable houses, both modern liberals and conservatives have been taking potshots at their conception of government. Bill Kristol and David Frumm have been especially keen on denigrating the libertarian idea of a government with properly circumscribed powers and scope. They have complained, also, that such a view is not sufficiently inspiring and that citizens cannot rally around the libertarian idea of society in which government has a restricted role. How would such a society fare in case it needed to be defended from foreign enemies? How could it function as a world power?

In essence the critics make the point that a minimalist government, looked upon with suspicion to start with – that is, thought of as “a necessary evil” – simply hasn’t a chance of survival, let alone flourishing. Governments must generate sufficient devotion, reverence and respect so as to garner the support needed to govern.

Government a la Libertarianism

But these critics fail to have a clear understanding of, let alone full appreciation for what the libertarian view of government really comes to. Indeed, they fail even to have a clear understanding of what a conservative is committed to in the American political context, which, when fully grasped, would be the vision of government articulated by the American Founders.

In fact, libertarianism does have a positive, upbeat but frankly demanding view of government, spelled out by the American Founders. It is “to secure these rights [to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness that] governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed.” That is the essence of the libertarian view of government. And how glorious that vision is -- for starters, consider its source!

The Just Powers of Government

So what are the just powers of government? Whatever is needed to secure the rights in question, no more, no less. And that is a large and honorable enough order for any institution!

Libertarians invoke nothing less than the Declaration of Independence as their rallying cry against those paternalistic conservatives who have no idea what it is that they wish to conserve from the American political tradition. Libertarians do: they want to preserve the Declaration's positive vision of government as the great, honorable, and properly understood guardian of our rights. Its moral virtues are vigilance, valor, honor, and, most of all, integrity.

What if politicians in our time – those professionals who have taken an oath to administer our government -- actually possessed these moral virtues? Would that not be inspiring? Would it not earn them respect from the citizenry? Certainly more so than would a state spread perilously thin from meddling in people's various non-political concerns, with all the attendant mishaps to degrade it, to give it the lowest standing American government has ever had (according to today's news).

The crucial point to be made to those who belittle limited government is exactly the above. Another is that government is disliked today, especially by libertarians, not in the role sketched above but as the monolithic leviathan it has become. What many people hate about government isn't its virtues but its vices that necessarily arise from its lack of integrity, lack of sticking to its duties.

Government in its Proper Perspective

One should also add that it is reductionist to think of political theory and public policy as needing to forge a vision for all of society -- society being a huge and diverse group of individuals intertwined in innumerable complicated ways with various goals and purposes suited to these individuals in their innumerable groupings and united by a common sense of civility, of respect for the rights of everyone. It is imperialistic to attempt to generalize the goals of one individual or a special group of them to that of others, apart from the very general purposes of seeking to live a fulfilled, happy, honorable life. To secure the right to do this is part of what makes government itself an honorable institution, when clearly understood and kept uncorrupted.

What the libertarian bemoans is the absence of a government deserving of proper respect and honor. He asks that we all subscribe to a substantial, exacting but properly delimited vision of politics. Even those among libertarians who have, often through exasperation, rejected the very idea of government – actually, most of them prefer using the Hegelian idea of “the State” when they articulate their anarchism – can give support to the limited conception outlined above. All of them are committed to some sort of

institutional defense of individual rights, be that a competing government, a defense agency, a justice agency or whatnot.

For most of us that means that some version of government as an agency dedicated to doing a conscientious job of guarding individual rights merits support from libertarianism. At this stage of the discussion it seems we are talking semantics, not substance. What should we call that unique agency of society that has as its duty to secure our rights? Whatever we do call it, it will be taken to be the instrument that other political theories tend to want to elevate to a place of not simply government but regimentation, rule, regulation – in short, coercion.

How could anyone seriously believe that a form of government that resists becoming coercive and carries out its job in accordance with due process – the requirements of justice – could not inspire the citizenry of the society in which it operates far more than does the degrading spectacle calling itself government today? Only folks who mistakenly expect government to be something it should never become, a parental authority.

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