

# A NEEDFUL BLESSING FOR THE TSAR

by Phil Trieb

In the opening scene of *Fiddler on the Roof*, the rabbi's son asks: "Is there a proper blessing for the tsar?" The rabbi responds: "A blessing for the tsar?" He ponders awhile, then pronounces: "Of course . . . May God bless and keep the tsar . . . far away from us!"

I may be partial to the line, because it belonged to me when I played the rabbi in a community presentation of that nearly thirty-year-old musical. In a production that still has much to say to America in the waning years of the twentieth century, that line may well be the most pertinent of the play, as regards our national crisis today.

Because for anything from hangnail to hurricane, the reaction of first resort, rather than the last, is to run to Uncle Sam, who, for the sweetness of his benefits, is known by many today as "Uncle Sugar."

To those less possessed of affection for beneficent tyranny, the vision of a huge "Uncle Sow," suckling legions of should-be-weaned pigs, is more appropriate.

To the villagers of Messrs. Stein, Bock, and Harnick's fictional Anatevka, the less contact with the agents of the tsar, the better. Or, as Jefferson stated: "That government is best which governs least."

In *Fiddler*, the Jewish villagers are forced

*Mr. Trieb is a father, husband, newspaper columnist, and graphic artist in Gary, South Dakota.*

to leave their "dear little village" under a pogrom, not initiated by the tsar, but nevertheless benignly endorsed, in that he does nothing to stop the racist deportations ordered by his underlings.

We have a parallel situation today in America. The president's administration may not initiate the privations experienced by those being ground up in the gears of the Internal Revenue Service, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration, the Environmental Protection Agency, or any of the scores of other federal agencies, but in that it does nothing in its ultimate political and administrative power to stop the excesses, the administration thereby endorses the economic and judicial deportations: of families forced from homes, farms, and businesses by government edict, rules and regs, bankruptcy borne of confiscatory taxation, or worse.

For all the talk of reinventing and streamlining government, there is in place an inexorable principle in the United States today: bureaucracies never die, they only grow. And to grow, these bureaucracies, which never produce any wealth of their own, must consume the productive wealth of others. Of course, taxation has been the traditional means, but increasingly, the consumption occurs through regulation, or enforcement.

This can be rather benign, in the irrita-

tions of paperwork necessitated by niggling regulations. A small business owner decides not to invent this widget or improve that whatsit—neither of which is crucial to life, but both of which are conducive to its comforts—because the licenses, permits, paperwork, and bureaucratic scrutiny make the reward minuscule compared to the cost.

Of course, the niggling can add up. A current study estimates that Americans are expending \$100 billion per year to cover the burdensome record-keeping requirements imposed by government on the health care system.

In the extreme, the bureaucracy can be deadly. Consider the growing numbers of innocent civilians terrorized, and even shot and killed by over-anxious anti-drug SWAT teams. (And of course, there is the annihilation of the Branch Davidian sect, of which the truth of the Federal Bureau of Investigation and Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms' actions may never be known due to the hasty bulldozing of the site after the fatal conflagration.)

Remember that bureaucracies, though they are by nature inefficient, must produce some kind of activity, some kind of movement, however pointless, to justify their existence. Imagine Uncle Sow again, who in foraging about the barnyard crushes and consumes other creatures. And Uncle Sow is very discriminating in whom he destroys: often it is the most productive, the most creative, the most innovative.

But that is a necessary evil, if Uncle Sow is to do so much "good," and provide for so many. But in a "less advanced" time in our history, there was a far different attitude toward government, and a vastly different hierarchy of help. When disease, death, or disaster had exhausted one's personal resources, one turned first to friends and family, then to church and community. (In many cases the latter mirrored the former.) It was recognized that those who were presently experiencing God's blessings would share with those who weren't. As to providing for the populace, government, especially the national government, was not even considered.

Yet in a terrible twisting of Jesus' command to "Love thy neighbor," there are churches today that, rather than care for those in need, have agencies and seminars to train the needy to make the most of available government "entitlements."

Elected officials, rather than help keep the "tsar" far away from us, help draw the government ever closer. Even U.S. Senators are no longer statesmen-guardians of our constitutional liberties, but professional beggars for subsidies to their states, and ombudsmen for constituents, often swamped by phone calls when Social Security or other government checks are merely a day late.

And unfortunately, God is left out of the discussion, at least in public discourse by politicians, journalists, think-tank intellectuals, unelected "policy makers," and shockingly, growing numbers of church leaders.

God was once considered omniscient, omnipotent, and omnipresent, now the government is considered all-knowing, all-powerful, all-present. Though citizens have contact with flesh and blood bureaucrats, the concept of government itself is becoming increasingly abstract, and like some distant, unseen deity, bestoweth its blessings (subsidies and entitlements) on the worthy (those who fulfill arbitrary requirements) and punishes (taxes) the wicked (i.e., the "rich," which is anyone making more than the one seeking benefits).

Yes, there were rich and poor in Anatevka. The beggar Nahum receives a kopek from Lazar Wolf, the rich butcher, and responds: "One kopek? Last week you gave me two kopeks." Lazar replies: "I had a bad week." Nahum retorts: "So if you had a bad week, why should I suffer?" In community- and church-based charity, generosity is based not only on the need of the recipient, but also on the ability of the benefactor to contribute. In government-based "entitlements," neither need nor ability to contribute is considered. One only must fulfill the arbitrary "requirements"—hence, shiny new pickups can be seen hauling away free U.S. Department of Agriculture commodi-

ties, and women in furs can plunk down food stamps to buy hamburger for pet dogs. And whatever the condition of the taxpayers funding the largesse, the benefits grow and grow and grow.

What the government subsidizes—illegitimacy, sloth, inefficiency, dishonesty, waste, inertia—we get more of. And what the government taxes—intact families, productivity, efficiency, honesty, frugality, innovation—we get less of.

Under the philosophy of providential government, most people, even elected state officials, regard federal government money as “free,” as if it grows on some distant money tree in a neo-Garden of Eden on the Potomac. The trouble is, that tree has its roots in the pockets of every productive American. And with the specter of universal, federally subsidized health care on the near horizon, the mythical money tree is

ready for an unprecedented explosion of new growth. (Yet we are expected to believe that the federal government will suddenly reverse 50 years of tradition, and run this program as a model of efficiency!)

These attitudes would have been anathema to most of our grandparents, many of whom fled the tyrannies of encroaching European socialism. They would also be anathema to the villagers of “Tumbledown, workaday” Anatevka. Their reliance was on God and each other, and though its people also called their village “underfed, overworked,” they knew that the closer the tsar drew to them, the more imperilled their lives would be.

We would do well to heed the rabbi in *Fiddler on the Roof*, and again inculcate the attitude in our children and our communities: May God bless and keep the government . . . far away from us! □

# STRIKERS AND SCABS

by Charles W. Baird

On June 15, 1993, the U.S. House of Representatives voted 239–190 to amend the National Labor Relations Act (NLRA) to prohibit employers from hiring permanent replacement workers in economic strikes. President Clinton promised to sign such legislation.

Republican senators have promised a filibuster, so the Senate leadership has postponed voting on the issue. When and if they round up the necessary sixty votes they will schedule the vote. A filibuster stopped iden-

tical legislation in the 102nd Congress, and there is a fair chance that it can do so again.

The proposed legislation applies only to economic strikes, which are union-initiated work stoppages over terms and conditions of employment. It is already illegal for employers to hire permanent replacement workers in unfair labor practice strikes, which are union-initiated work stoppages over illegal actions by employers such as firing a worker for advocating unionism.

## The Nature of the Right to Strike

Unionists portray this issue as one of simple justice. They claim that the right to

*Dr. Baird, a contributing editor of The Freeman, is Professor of Economics and Director of The Smith Center for Private Enterprise Studies, California State University, Hayward.*