

Leviathan: America's Secret Challenge

by William H. Peterson

How helpful of physicist S. Fred Singer, head of the Washington area-based Science and Environmental Policy Project, to restore the idea of “hormesis.” Hormesis is the principle that things beneficial to life in low doses can be fatal in high doses.

Singer mentions such things as alcohol, sunshine, iodine, sodium, iron, copper, cholesterol, and nuclear radiation (as involved in low-dose X-rays). Excessive food can kill: obesity can lead to a heart attack. The same could be said of excessive exercise. Singer similarly sees bacteria as a possibly constructive agent since a totally sterile environment could cause an unchallenged healthy immune system to deteriorate.

Well, this raises quite a question: Is not government itself hormetic?

Wasn't Thomas Paine onto something in his *Common Sense* (1776) in seeing government as “a necessary evil”? Cannot excessive government be fatal to human life? Indeed. Recall the fatal regimes of Germany under Hitler, the Soviet Union under Stalin, and China under Mao in the twentieth century.

Thus America, apart from the entire West, faces a rather silent if potentially deadly challenge: Can it reverse direction from its march to a broadening “public” (read coercive) sector ever away from a shrinking pri-

vate (read voluntary) sector and thereby stop courting a hormetic ending?

Look, Peterson, say my critics: Stop playing Cassandra. Go outside and enjoy the summer. Didn't we all enjoy the 2002 Winter Olympics out of Salt Lake City? I respond with some lines from Alexander Pope:

Vice is a monster of so frightful mien,
As to be hated needs but to be seen;
But seen too oft, familiar with her face,
We first endure, then pity, then embrace.

Look. Did not the Founding Fathers, themselves close students of history, wrestle with hormetics so as to better guide us today? Hence did they not set down such things as checks and balances in government so as to limit its powers (as specified and enumerated in Article 1, Section 8, in the U.S. Constitution); provide a written constitution; a bicameral legislature; a tripartite central government of legislative, executive, and judicial branches; shared power with the states; and the Bill of Rights' Ninth and Tenth Amendments, leaving no doubt of their limited-government aims, per:

The enumeration in the Constitution, of certain rights, shall not be construed to deny or disparage others retained by the people.

The powers not delegated to the United States by the Constitution, nor prohibited by it to the States, are reserved to the States respectively, or to the people.

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So the strangely silent challenge for America in 2002 and beyond is, I submit, to reverse course and get back to the limited-government philosophy of the Declaration of Independence of 1776, the Constitution of 1787, and the Bill of Rights of 1791. Recall the ringing libertarian language of Thomas Jefferson in the Declaration: “We hold these truths to be self-evident; that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness; that to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed. . . .”

The rub with consent today is its relative absence. Did you consent to be enrolled in Social Security as Congress decreed in 1935? And what of the cited Ninth and Tenth Amendments? Hasn’t their impact been critically cut over time—unable to hold back a progressively “liberal” U.S. Supreme Court and its loose constitutional interpretations, especially after Franklin Roosevelt threatened to pack the Court in 1937? The threat worked. It led to reversals of stands by ex-diehard constitutionalist justices on such matters as the meaning of the “general welfare” clause in Article 1, Section 8. And so did the Court come to embrace the New Deal and the welfare state.

Today the irony is that the Constitution is said to be “living,” which may well mean that it is in fact dying.

Drop Leviathan

Peterson, you would reverse national direction? And how!

So, Americans all, drop Leviathan, embrace and practice liberty (a word bandied about but ill understood). Recall how Robert Higgs proved in his ace study, *Crisis and Leviathan* (1987), that the size and power of central government invariably grew, net, with each passing national crisis, in particular with the Civil War, World Wars I and II, the Great Depression, the Cold War, and the Great Society-Vietnam War, which set forth such programs as,

Higgs, “Medicare, Medicaid, environmental and occupational safety regulations, consumer-protection and anti-discrimination laws, and the political forces to sustain all these programs.”

Now, presumably and sadly, comes the War on Terrorism with perhaps similar import and dosage.

Think how the prospects for reversing national direction are weakened by the War on Terrorism. Ponder if it is a winnable war or something of an open-ended impossibility. You cannot declare a war on terrorism. It’s like declaring a war on murder, says Roy Licklider, a political scientist at Rutgers University, as reported by Fox News Online (December 31, 2001). The war sounds Kafkaesque: Perpetual War for Perpetual Peace, or is it perchance Perpetual War for Perpetual Re-election? Or as Jacob Hornberger, head of the Future of Freedom Foundation, noted in his *Freedom Daily* in December 2001: It’s a general, undefined, perpetual war on terrorism that now constitutes the biggest obstacle to the achievement of a free society.

And that was before President Bush’s 2002 State of the Union Address in which he nailed North Korea, Iran, and Iraq as the “axis of evil,” a phrase his critics in America, Asia, and western Europe tag with such epithets as “simplistic,” “unilateralist,” and “provocative.”

Prophetic Orwell

Consider the juxtaposition of direction reversal and perpetual war—an idea that smacks of George Orwell’s 1984 and the motto of the Ministry of Truth, “War Is Peace.” The motto sounds less far-fetched in 2002.

Item: The *New York Times* lead story of February 19, 2002, charged that the Pentagon planned to broaden the scope of its recently created Office of Strategic Influence to “send [spin?] news or maybe false news [read disinformation] to even friendly lands,” a charge denied by Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, yet a charge that confronts much history in which the first casualty of war is

the truth. (Rumsfeld was forced to scrap the Office in the heat of the bad publicity.)

Certainly, reversal of national direction is harder when fazed House Republicans, sans guidance or leadership from a seemingly war-preoccupied White House, joined their Democrat counterparts to pass last February the flawed Shays-Meehan bill. The bill further violates the First Amendment while further securing member incumbency. Similar confusion or miscalculation was seen in GOP and Democrat versions of Keynesian-oriented “stimulus” bills designed to spur a lagging economy.

For America to reverse direction, then, is most challenging. The revolution was. The center cannot hold. So what, say many Americans who embrace—and vote for—the welfare state? Thus is America cursed by what Milton Friedman calls “the tyranny of

the status quo.” So the center has shifted—and continues to shift—toward statism.

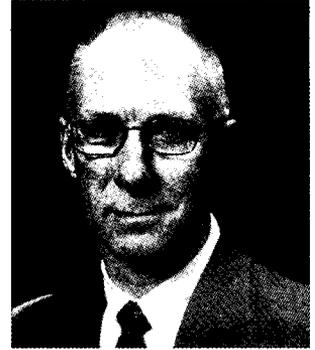
The national silence, including academe and the media, on this ongoing shift is deafening. Consider. The State is hormetic, and its current dosage, already high with the federal budget alone at more than \$2 trillion, grows still and accelerates more with an open-ended War on Terrorism—growth hardly benign but, frankly, dangerous. Stay tuned.

Even so, the challenge to America is to work to win back the future as the Founders saw it, to roll back the size and power of government, to reinvigorate individual rights, private property rights, and the rule of law, all while preserving security, all while reclaiming the American Dream. A tall order, I agree, but please tell me if there is any other workable answer. □



After having . . . successively taken each member of the community in its powerful grasp and fashioned him at will, the supreme power then extends its arm over the whole community. It covers the surface of society with a network of small complicated rules, minute and uniform, through which the most original minds and the most energetic characters cannot penetrate, to rise above the crowd. The will of man is not shattered, but softened, bent, and guided; men are seldom forced by it to act, but they are constantly restrained from acting. Such a power does not destroy, but it prevents existence; it does not tyrannize, but it compresses, enervates, extinguishes, and stupefies a people, till each nation is reduced to nothing better than a flock of timid and industrious animals, of which the government is the shepherd.

—ALEXIS DE TOCQUEVILLE, *Democracy in America*



The Rise of the West

Throughout almost the entire span of human history, material privation and chronic insecurity were the norm. Not even those at the peaks of social status and political power could enjoy the creature comforts and consumer delights that “poor” people take for granted in the West today. At times, certain populations fared somewhat better—in ancient Greece and Rome, perhaps, and in China during the Sung Dynasty (960–1279)—but those cases were exceptional.

As late as the fourteenth century, the Chinese probably enjoyed the highest level of living of any large population. Recall the amazement with which Europeans greeted Marco Polo’s account of China in the latter part of the thirteenth century, even though, as Polo declared on his deathbed, he had not described the half of what he had seen.¹

As the Middle Ages waned the Europeans began to make quicker economic progress, while the Chinese lapsed into economic stagnation. Even more remarkable, the economic energy of Europe began to shift away from the great commercial centers of northern Italy and toward the periphery of civilization in northwestern Europe. The barbarians, it seemed, had somehow stumbled onto the secret of economic progress. Henceforth, despite many setbacks, the western Europeans—and later their colonial cousins in North America as well—steadily pulled ahead of the human pack. By the eighteenth

century they had far surpassed the Chinese, not to speak of the world’s more backward peoples, and until the late twentieth century the gap continued to widen.

How did the West succeed in generating sustained economic progress? Historians and social scientists have offered various hypotheses, and so far no single explanation has gained general acceptance. Nevertheless, certain elements of an answer have received wide agreement. The growing individualism of Western culture, rooted in Christian doctrine, seems to have contributed significantly.² In addition, the political fragmentation of the European peoples in the high Middle Ages and the early modern period—a political pluralism with hundreds of separate jurisdictions—fostered the institutional and technological experimentation by which entrepreneurs could discover how to make labor and capital more productive.

Fundamental to that sustained dynamism was the gradually improving status of private property rights. So long as people cannot count on a reasonable prospect of reaping the fruits of their efforts and investments, they have little or no incentive to work hard or to accumulate physical, human, and intellectual capital. And without such accumulation, no ongoing economic progress is possible. More reliable private property rights did not just drop from heaven, however. For the most part, the merchants acquired the protection of such rights by paying off the robber barons and aspiring kings who constituted the fragmented ruling stratum of western Europe.

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