

# Say It Isn't So, Jerry Lewis

by *P. Gardner Goldsmith*

It was a disappointing day for me, that day last year when comedian Jerry Lewis testified before a Senate subcommittee seeking taxpayer funding for muscular dystrophy research. It drove home how in the past 70 years the virtue of charity has been corrupted from a matter of individual choice and initiative to one of group ethics and majority control.

During his 1998 telethon, Muscular Dystrophy Association (MDA) chairman Jerry Lewis proudly announced that the MDA did not take a dime of government money. Everything his organization received came from the kindness and charity of individual people. MDA could rightly be characterized a “charitable” organization.

But that changed on September 24, 2001, when the U.S. House of Representatives passed H.R. 717, the “MD-Care Act,” which expanded the existing purview of the National Institutes of Health’s (NIH) research budget to cover the nine forms of muscular dystrophy. In pushing for the bill, MDA advocates asked for an additional \$100 million to be added to the NIH budget, all targeted toward MD research. The House version moved smoothly through the Senate, and on December 18, 2001, President Bush signed the resulting increase into law.

While some Americans might hear this news and believe “the nation is finally doing something, recognizing how important it is to cure MD,” others will be disappointed, indeed, frustrated, that once more the definition of charity has been twisted out of shape.

Charity is based on volition. Without choice, one cannot act on one’s own moral prerogatives. Government decrees represent the opposite of choice. With government funding we are supposed to believe that “America cares,” when, in fact, nearly half of Americans might not care or they might have other priorities. Given the political nature of the House and Senate, and that less than half of Americans vote, the idea that a bill passed by both houses to fund a particular charity somehow represents the “collective will of the people” is fanciful.

But during the twentieth century, Americans have come to view the collective will—as expressed through the political gamesmanship of Washington politics—as representative of society’s values. This could not be further from the truth. Society, as most Enlightenment thinkers correctly recognized, is something apart from government. It is the realm in which we interact consensually. One cannot have a fully flourishing society when the burdensome mechanism of government supersedes individual choice, and one certainly cannot claim that a society “cares” based on the priorities of illegitimate wealth redistributors.

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*P. Gardner Goldsmith (elgrande@yahoo.com) is an independent journalist and screenwriter in New Hampshire.*

## Celebrate Witnesses

Seeing Mr. Lewis testify before a Senate subcommittee in favor of government funding for MD research was disappointing. Likewise, hearing word of his associate, and MDA board member, Ed McMahon testifying before a House subcommittee inspired a sense of sadness. But these men, who do wonderful work outside the government arena, are certainly not alone. Over the past few years celebrity appearances before government committees have become commonplace, including Michael J. Fox lobbying for greater research on Parkinson's disease and Christopher Reeve imploring the government to spend more money on spinal chord research. What is overlooked in every case is that

there is no such thing as "government money." It all comes from individuals, who are deprived of free choice whenever the government takes the fruits of their labor and spends them on whatever it believes to be best.

When the Red River flooded four years ago, smothering portions of Grand Forks, North Dakota, and Minnesota with ice, water, and mud, one of the mayors in the area said the congressional vote to provide more federal dollars in aid signified how much Americans cared.

Wrong.

One does not determine the measure of a society's compassion by how much its government seizes from individuals and gives to others. No matter the motive, that is not charity. It is theft.

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## A Privatization Revolution in a Most Unlikely Place

**W**hen Mount Nyiragongo suddenly gushed red hot lava down its southern slope and destroyed the town of Goma in the Congo last January, hundreds of thousands of refugees poured into tiny neighboring Rwanda.

It was the first time since 1994 that Rwanda had been on the front pages in America, and most of the stories reminded readers of the awful circumstances of the previous occasion. In 1994, nearly a million of the country's eight million citizens were slaughtered in ethnic violence between the Tutsi and Hutu tribes. Perhaps in reading the news of this most recent tragedy, Americans wondered if anything good ever happens there.

I was in Rwanda last January to observe in the wild some of the only 670 mountain gorillas left in the world. They live on a string of lush, rain forested-volcanoes along the border with Uganda and the Congo. Mount Nyiragongo, adjacent to the volcano I climbed to see the gorillas, blew up just three days after I left. But the purpose of this column is not to bring more bad news from Rwanda; the purpose is to share some incredibly *good* news, which deserves far more attention than the few paragraphs it has so far garnered in the Western press.

Hints of this good news came my way weeks before even arriving in Rwanda. Making reservations for my gorilla safari via

*Lawrence Reed (Reed@mackinac.org) is president of the Mackinac Center for Public Policy (www.mackinac.org), a free-market research and educational organization in Midland, Michigan.*

e-mail, I learned that all gorilla safaris are conducted by private, native-owned, and locally run companies. (Part of the fee goes to the government for distribution in salaries to national park employees and for programs that protect gorilla habitat. Such programs are substantially supplemented by the efforts of private, nonprofits that get support from around the world.) Three years ago two Rwandan entrepreneurs started the firm I signed up with, Primate Safaris. With six employees, they provide everything a gorilla safari enthusiast in a Third World country could hope for—a competent guide with a four-wheel drive, good meals, and comfortable though Spartan accommodations. The lodge where I stayed at the base of one of the volcanoes is owned by a Rwandan women's association now, but at the time they bought it two years ago it was government property.

One of the first road signs a visitor sees upon arriving at the airport outside the capital of Kigali reads, "Privatization: A Loss? No Way." Another one a couple miles away in the downtown area declares that privatization fights laziness, poverty, smuggling, and unemployment. This is the good news to which I've referred: Rwanda, in the heart of Africa, is engaged in the continent's most ambitious privatization campaign. It may be the *most* ambitious and systematic of any country anywhere. After experiencing the kind of stifling socialist rule that consigned virtually all of Africa to grinding deprivation for ages, this is a country that is embracing the private sector with deliberate policy and enormous enthusiasm.