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*Etceteras . . .*

## Government Protects Us?

When I was younger and even more ignorant than I am today, I believed that government (understood conventionally as a monopoly of legitimate coercive force in a given territory) performs an essential function—namely, the protection of individuals from the aggressions of others, whether those others be compatriots or foreigners—and that no other institution can perform this function successfully. Indeed, I once wrote a book whose very first sentence reads, “We must have government” (*Crisis and Leviathan: Critical Episodes in the Growth of American Government* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1987], 3). In holding this belief, I was merely plodding along the path of the great unreflective herd, although, to be sure, many philosophers, social scientists, and other deep thinkers have reached the same conclusion. Growing older, however, has given me an opportunity to reexamine the bases of my belief in the indispensability of the protective services of government (again, as conventionally understood). As I have done so, I have become increasingly skeptical, and I now am more inclined to disbelieve the idea than to believe it. More and more, the proposition strikes me as almost preposterous.

My skepticism springs in part from my improved understanding of just how horrendously destructive and murderous governments have been, not only by their involvement in wars with other governments, but more tellingly in their assaults on their own citizens. According to the statistics compiled by R. J. Rummel, governments probably caused the deaths of some 170 million of *their own citizens* between 1900 and 1987 (*Death by Government* [New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction, 1994], 4), and the death toll has continued to rise during the past fifteen years. To this gruesome total must be added some 40 million others who perished in battle in the wars that the world’s governments plunged their populations into during the twentieth century (*ibid.*, 3).

Yes, yes, you may be saying, *certain* governments surely have acted murderously, but that bad behavior reflects not on government as such, but rather on the bad manners of the Chinese, the Russians, the Germans, and so forth. Or perhaps you are objecting that the fault lies not in government as such, but rather in communism, fascism, or some other ugly ideology that prompted the leaders of certain governments to misbehave so outrageously. These objections, however, cannot bear much weight,

because the destructiveness of governments has spanned a huge range of ethnicity and of ideology. In control of egregious governments have been Chinese, Russians, Germans, Japanese, Cambodians, Turks, Spaniards, Vietnamese, Poles, Pakistanis, Yugoslavs, British, Koreans, Croatians, Mexicans, Indonesians, Ugandans, Rwandan Hutus, Nigerians, and a variety of other ethnic or national types. The common denominator would seem to be not ethnicity or nationality but government. In control of appalling governments have been nationalists, tribalists, fascists, communists, socialists, and adherents of various other ideologies or of none at all. Again, the common denominator would seem to be government itself.

Well, you say, the world certainly has endured more than its fair share of vicious rulers, but our own government would never commit such crimes. Unfortunately, it has done so already. The attacks by U.S. troops on civilians and their means of subsistence in the Confederate States of America during the War Between the States surely rank as heinous in the highest degree (Thomas J. DiLorenzo, “Waging War on Civilians,” in *The Real Lincoln: A New Look at Abraham Lincoln, His Agenda, and an Unnecessary War* [Roseville, Calif.: Forum, 2002], 171–99). The devastation wreaked on many American Indian tribes brings no honor and much shame to the history of the U.S. government. In my own lifetime, in the 1940s, the U.S. government was pleased to drop thousands of tons of high-explosive and incendiary bombs on the residential areas of German and Japanese cities, blasting, suffocating, and incinerating hundreds of thousands of innocent men, women, and children who happened to be living there. Referring to Tokyo, General Curtis LeMay declared, “We knew we were going to kill a lot of women and kids when we burned that town. Had to be done” (qtd. in Sven Lindqvist, *A History of Bombing*, translated by Linda Haverty Rugg [New York: New Press, 2000], 109). The government ultimately capped even this wanton cruelty by exploding atomic bombs above the hapless populations of two large Japanese cities. At Hiroshima, “about 100,000 people (95,000 of them civilians) were killed instantly. Another 100,000, most of these civilians as well, died long, drawn-out deaths from the effects of radiation” (ibid., 112). The A-bomb dropped on Nagasaki, which was exploded directly above “a suburb of schools, factories, and private houses,” killed some 74,000 people and injured a similar number, the great majority of them civilians, “with the affected survivors suffering the same long-term catastrophic results of radiation and mental trauma as at Hiroshima” (“Nagasaki,” in *The Oxford Companion to World War II*, edited by I. C. B. Dear and M. R. D. Foot [New York: Oxford University Press], 1995, 773). So where’s the essential difference between the actions of those allegedly wicked governments and the actions of our own? Might it be that government itself is the root of the evil?

But without government, the familiar refrain goes, we would be plunged into anarchy—understood conventionally as violent chaos, a Hobbesian war of all against all. Nothing, it is widely assumed, could be worse than the situation that would exist without government (as we know it). Notice, however, that this supposition is just that—a mere supposition. Can we really imagine that, absent governments to organ-

ize and goad them on, the world's people would have been so obtuse and antisocial that they would have ended up slaughtering *more than 210 million* of one another in the twentieth century before coming to their senses? Such a vision of haphazard violence boggles the mind. Even though my own opinion of mankind is, I confess, substantially lower than the average opinion, I still have trouble imagining that without government people would have done even worse than they did *with* government.

Setting aside the doubts raised by exercises in counterfactual history, we still encounter troubling questions about the government's protective function. One can't help wondering: Why do so many of us continue to fall victim to murder, rape, assault, robbery, burglary, and other crimes too numerous to catalog? Where's the vaunted government protection? According to the Federal Bureau of Investigation's compilation of offenses known to police (the number of offenses that actually occur is far greater), in 1999 the residents of the United States suffered some 16,000 murders; 89,000 forcible rapes; 410,000 robberies; and 916,000 aggravated assaults—not to speak of some 2,100,000 burglaries; 6,957,000 larcenies and thefts; and 1,147,000 motor vehicle thefts (U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Statistical Abstract of the United States 2001* [Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2001], 182).

In truth, most Americans know perfectly well that the government either cannot or will not actually protect them and their property, and therefore they have resorted increasingly to protecting themselves. For the past several decades, the private-security industry has been among the fastest growing in the United States (and in many other countries, too). According to a 1997 report by *The Economist*, in 1970 the government police outnumbered private police by 40 percent, but “now there are three times as many private policemen as public ones. . . . Americans also spend a lot more on private security (about \$90 billion a year) than they do, through tax dollars, on the public police (\$40 billion). Even the government itself spends more hiring private guards than it does paying for police forces” (“Welcome to the New World of Private Security,” *The Economist*, April 19, 1997, qtd. from on-line text). The reporter notes astutely, “The private sector has rushed into a vacuum of demand for law and order left unfulfilled by the state.”

Do you feel safer in a shopping mall or a gated residential community protected by private security personnel or on a public street protected by government cops? To ask the question is to answer it. If government had been performing the essential protective function it continually trots out to justify its intrusions and its tax burdens—indeed, its very existence—there would have been no “vacuum” for the private security industry to occupy. Government cops may show up, in their own sweet time, to take some notes after a crime has been committed. Private security forces, in contrast, prevent crimes from occurring in the first place. Relying on government police, the public must suffer the insult of paying for the cops in addition to the injuries and losses caused by the criminals because heaven forbid that government require the guilty parties to make restitution to their victims. Instead, the wounded public must pay still again to finance the government's prison system, where the inmates while

away their time consuming drugs and dreaming of new crimes to commit upon their release.

Worst of all, government police and prosecutors, unlike private protective personnel, also busy themselves in *committing* crimes rather than in preventing them. When government agents arrest and prosecute people for actions that those persons have every just right to undertake—from smoking pot to gambling to trafficking in sexual services to selling unlicensed services or “unapproved” medicines—those government functionaries act not as protectors of the public but as agents of naked tyranny: in Gore Vidal’s words, “so many Jacobins at war against the lives, freedom, and property of our citizens” (*Perpetual War for Perpetual Peace: How We Got to Be So Hated* [New York: Thunder’s Mouth, Nation Books, 2002], p. 115). No wonder such large swaths of the population view these enforcers with contempt and even hatred. A government that presumes to protect citizens from themselves, jamming its jails and prisons with millions of such inoffensive offenders, has indeed gone to war against its own people. Where is John Locke when we need him?

Almost eighty years ago, H. L. Mencken composed what is arguably the most perceptive essay ever written on government. In it he dealt squarely with the alleged protective function of government, as follows:

The citizen of today, even in the most civilized states, is not only secured but defectively against other citizens who aspire to exploit and injure him . . . he is also exploited and injured almost without measure by the government itself—in other words, by the very agency which professes to protect him. . . . He finds it more difficult and costly to survive in the face of it than it is to survive in the face of any other enemy. . . . But he can no more escape the tax-gatherer and the policemen, in all their protean and multitudinous guises, than he can escape the ultimate mortician. They beset him constantly, day in and day out, in ever-increasing numbers and in ever more disarming masks and attitudes. They invade his liberty, affront his dignity and greatly incommode his search for happiness, and every year they demand and wrest from him a larger and larger share of his worldly goods. (“On Government,” in H. L. Mencken, *Prejudices: A Selection*, edited by James T. Farrell [New York: Vintage, 1958], pp. 178–79)

Since Mencken made these observations in 1924, the situation has gotten only worse—much worse, steadily worse. Powerful elites, especially the information masters of the so-called New Class, beat their tom-toms incessantly to alert us to each new danger de jour—just tune in Cable News Network’s *Headline News* on any day of any week—and they clamor ceaselessly for new government protections that the government, in truth, cannot or will not actually provide.

The government will never cease, however, to *claim* that it protects the people and to devote its immense resources to propagandizing and bamboozling the public to prop up that claim. As Vidal has observed, “there is little respite for a people so

routinely—so fiercely—disinformed” (*Perpetual War for Perpetual Peace*, p. 115). Will people ever see through this flimflam? Mencken himself held out little hope. “The extortions and oppressions of government will go on,” he declared, “so long as such bare fraudulence deceives and disarms the victims” (“On Government,” p. 188), and for him there was no end in sight. Sad to say, he was probably right.

ROBERT HIGGS