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What's Wrong with Looting? It's the American Way!

by Jacob G. Hornberger

Responding to the massive looting committed by Iraqis as part of their newly found “freedom,” Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld observed, “Stuff happens. It’s untidy. And freedom’s untidy. And free people are free to make mistakes and commit crimes and do bad things.”

The reason for his indifference is simple: Looting is as American as motherhood, democracy, “freedom,” and apple pie. In fact, looting is the principle that undergirds America’s modern-day welfare state — the economic system that’s been in place since Franklin D. Roosevelt foisted it on the American people in the 1930s.

The looting that takes place in the welfare state is different from the looting in Iraq in only one way: In the welfare state, it’s legal because it’s done by the government and has been approved by the people through a democratic process. The state taxes everyone in order to redistribute the loot to some lucky recipients. That’s not any different from what the Iraqi looters are doing, except that they’re eliminating the middleman because, thanks to the U.S. government, there’s no middleman around to do it for them.

The central issue, however, is a moral one: Is it moral to take what doesn’t belong to you, either on an individual basis or a collective one? Can the moral consequences of “Thou shalt not steal” be avoided by changing the terms to “taxation and redistribution” and having the process approved by a majority of voters?

Consider an example from the Commonwealth of Virginia. Last fall, there was a statewide vote on whether to raise taxes to provide additional state subsidies to state-supported colleges and universities in Virginia.

An immediate question arises: If the schools needed money, why couldn’t they each embark on a fundraising drive in which they solicited voluntary contributions from people? Or why couldn’t they voluntarily band together and have a joint fundraising drive in which they divided the proceeds in an agreed-upon manner?

The answer is: They could have, but that process might not have produced as much money as the statewide taxing plan. That's the part that raises the moral issue.

Let's assume that in a voluntary fundraising drive, 60 percent of the people of Virginia would voluntarily donate a total of \$10 million and that everyone else would decide not to donate. Let's also assume that the donor group gets out to the polls on election day and outpolls those who vote against the referendum. As a result of the electoral win, all Virginians, including those who would have said "No," must now pay a tax that ends up distributing, say, \$20 million to the colleges and universities.

That means that people who would have chosen not to donate have seen their money taken from them to fund a project that they would have preferred not to fund. They might have chosen to use their money in a different way, perhaps by funding their local church, or paying for health-care expenses, or (heaven forbid) going on a vacation. We don't really know why they would have said "No" to the fundraiser. All we know is that as a result of the successful statewide referendum, their money is now being looted and given to the schools.

The irony is that the administrators at Virginia colleges and universities would be the first ones to tell their students, "It's morally wrong to steal. It's morally wrong to take what doesn't belong to you. And we won't tolerate your committing such wrongful acts at this school." But as long as the plundering and looting is accomplished legally and democratically (and benefits the school), the moral issue falls by the wayside.

We can debate endlessly over which functions of government are moral and proper (such as a police force to arrest suspected murderers and a court system to bring them to justice), but is it really a moral and proper function of government to take money from one person for the purpose of giving it to another person?

The words of the 19th-century French free-market legislator Frédéric Bastiat best describe the nature of America's modern-day welfare state: "A great fiction by which everyone is trying to live at the expense of everyone else." A fiction indeed, but one whose moral consequences are no different from those of the Iraqi looters.

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This article was originally published in April of 2003.