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## **For Starters, What Is Government?**

**by Stu Pritchard**

Soon! Soon! Welcome contemplation in the voting booth will silence political shouting. Most of us have had a bellyful of charge and countercharge, of shrill bombast, of candidates almost questioning each other's parentage. How refreshing it would be to hear one reply as did The Virginian in the novel of that name, "When you call me that, smile!"

Also refreshing would be campaign oratory, even sound bites, such as spoken by our Founders more than 200 years ago. Notwithstanding negative campaigns during those early days, candidates talked about such things as the philosophical underpinnings of government — those dealing with private property, individual freedom, and human nature.

I'd like to hear even a few references to four questions:

- (1) What is government? What is its definition?
- (2) By that definition do we need government?
- (3) If so, how much? Where should the limitation on government be placed?
- (4) How can that limitation be maintained?

For starters, how about these answers?

(1) Government is organized force. Like fire, it is a dangerous servant and a terrible master. It is the sole legal repository of the collective force of citizens living within a given boundary. It is the raised clenched fist of authority enforcing thou-shalt-nots.

(2) Yes, we need government, but for the same reason that we need limited government — limited, that is, to national defense and to keeping the peace internally. Power does corrupt, as pointed out by Lord Acton 100 years ago and Thomas Jefferson 200 years ago.

(3) Well, let's draw the line after police protection, national defense, enforcement of contracts, and punishment for fraud and misrepresentation. How about public roads and postal system? And (roughly in chronological sequence of history) public fire protection? Public education? Public parks, housing, food, and subsidies to favored groups? Public control of work hours, holidays, wages, communications, commerce, water, and garbage? Public transport (including Amtrak)? Public medicine? Public banking, money, and interest (the "Fed")? Public

licensures of fishing, hunting, and nearly every profession and occupation? Public lands and forests? Public planning, zoning, and building codes? Public pools, courts, rinks, and paths? Public outer space and oceanic depths? The list is endless. Now, change the word “public” to “socialized.” As we witness the collapse worldwide of dictocratic socialized economies, where should we draw the line beyond which we forbid our governments to go with their monopolized use of force? Where, then, do we allow peaceful, entrepreneurial, creative, free-market activity with private property to proceed in directions now unimaginable?

(4) Wherever that line might be drawn by each individual in curtailing governmental use of force, let each person consider how that boundary will not be violated. Our Founders tried. They inserted words such as “no” and “not” 46 times in the Constitution to proscribe, not prescribe, those things that our governments could do.

Would that each voter returned to First Principles, basic premises, in considering the choices on November 2! Let each of us raise these questions of any issue or candidate: If passed or elected, would government’s coercive power over us individuals tend to be diminished or increased? Would that power tend to be narrowed or widened? Would government’s regulatory power over each citizen’s life and property be restricted or enhanced? In what has already become (by almost invisible increments) a massive, socialized orgy of confiscation (legal stealing), would there be more or less money left in our wallets for our own “pursuit of happiness”?

Then, let us vote accordingly!

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**This article was originally published in October 2004.**