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Tsunami Aid: Not Theirs to Give

by Sheldon Richman

The devastating earthquake-induced tidal waves in Asia are the latest reminders that Mother Nature can be a mass killer. It's worth contemplating that the societies that interfere most with nature — the rich, market-oriented industrial societies — are the least vulnerable to her ravages. That's not what the environmentalists would have us believe; but there it is. You could look it up.

This won't seem the appropriate time to point this out, but the money President George W. Bush is generously promising to deliver to the tsunami victims is not his to give. I don't know exactly what you call someone who freely gives out other people's money, but "generous" is not the word. Presumptuous, maybe.

President Bush has no proper authority to send even a penny to the victims. On the other hand, the American people, individually, have every authority to send as much of their own money as they wish. They started doing so the moment they grasped the immensity of the disaster. Undoubtedly, they would do more if government weren't doing it for them. They'd also have more money with which to be generous if government at all levels didn't take so much of their incomes.

As for the president's alleged authority, where does it come from? There is nothing in the Constitution that delegates to the president or the Congress the power to send the taxpayers' money to domestic victims of natural disasters, much less to foreign victims. If anyone disagrees, let him put his finger on the provision. The powers delegated to Congress are found in Article I, Section 8. The first clause states that Congress's power to tax is confined to these purposes: "to pay the Debts and provide for the common Defence and general Welfare of the United States." The preamble to the Constitution sets out the purpose of the document: "establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defence, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity."

I submit that helping the victims of tidal waves falls under none of those purposes. Earlier presidents understood this. James Madison and Grover Cleveland, among others, vetoed bills

appropriating money to disaster victims on the grounds that such acts were not authorized by the basic law of the land. If you want to understand how far we have strayed from the founding philosophy, imagine a president today vetoing such a bill while quoting Madison or Cleveland. (In four years of prodigious profligacy, President Bush couldn't find one bill worthy of his veto pen.)

So let's forget the Constitution and look at morality unadorned. By what standard is it permissible for government officials to take money from you in order to give it to someone else? Frédéric Bastiat, the great 19-century champion of freedom, rightly called that "legal plunder." Could it be anything else?

The principle does not change simply because the intended recipients are suffering. That is a matter for the owners of income. Generosity in the face of horrible misfortune is undoubtedly a virtue. Benevolence is a natural consequence of rational self-interest. But there is no proper government role here. Forced generosity and benevolence are contradictions in terms.

It is outrageous that political hacks outside the United States, including the ones at the buffoonish United Nations, feel justified in criticizing the U.S. government for not giving enough money. It's even more outrageous that President Bush went on the defensive and said he would increase amount. It goes to show that America's political misleaders know as little about the American founding philosophy as the heads of other states do. How pathetic.

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