



11350 Random Hills Road, Suite 800, Fairfax, Virginia 22030 Phone (703) 934-6101 Fax (703) 352-3678

fff@fff.org www.fff.org

Mr. Bush, Mind Your Own Business **by Sheldon Richman**

So President Bush wants us to conserve gasoline by driving less. Cut out the nonessential car trips, he says. It seems to me that the quintessential American response is simply this: With all due respect Mr. President, mind your own business.

You see, in America (why doesn't he know this?) each of us is supposed to be free to decide for himself what's essential. Moreover, each of us is supposed to be free (in the words of the Spanish proverb) to take what he wants, and pay for it.

In other words, Americans should be offended when a president (who died and made him king?) sticks his nose into their personal business.

President Bush likes to portray himself as a fan of the free market, but talk and pandering are cheap. The test of a free-market advocate is how he reacts during a sudden fall in supply of a widely used product. The phony is easily spotted. He's the one urging conservation and, perhaps, positive government measures to increase supply. In contrast, the genuine marketeer looks for the ways government intervention is stifling entrepreneurship. He jealously guards the integrity of the price system and the freedom of consumers to make decisions in their own best interests, insisting only that each one face the full costs of his decisions.

Now which is President Bush? Here's a clue: he condemned "price gougers" and hectored us about our driving.

The principal difference between the genuine marketeer and the phony is that the genuine marketeer, unlike the phony, understands that nothing compares to unfettered markets at (1) respecting freedom and (2) placing the division of labor and knowledge at the service of everyone in society. Part of this process involves the price system's dual constructive role of summoning greater supplies by offering entrepreneurs new chances for profit and encouraging consumers to economize.

Once the nature of the market process is grasped, one readily sees that there is no economic role for government whatsoever, except to repeal any interventionist measures that may exist.

With gasoline prices higher and incomes unchanged, obviously each of us faces new budget constraints. Each person can drive the same amount as before and cut other spending (or saving) or drive less. If a person chooses to drive less, he will eliminate inessential driving — inessential according to his personal preferences. If Mr. Jones cuts out his trips to the health club, but continues his drives in the country, we are entitled to conclude that he has chosen the more important over the less important uses of his car. That is necessarily revealed by his actions. No one can choose the less important over the more important. To think this is possible is to misunderstand the concept “choose.”

Considering all this, what does Bush’s unsolicited advice contribute? Nothing good, to be sure

But it does have a malign effect, in that it further accustoms people to the idea that one’s personal life is to some extent a public matter. (Government’s control of medicine conveys this idea in an especially ham-handed way.) It thus subtly reinforces the collectivist mentality that for decades has changed the American people from the cantankerous lot of individualists they once were into the tractable herd they have become. (Can you imagine early nineteenth-century Americans accepting the totalitarian and offensively named USA PATRIOT Act?)

When I was growing up, my father routinely turned off lights in unoccupied rooms of our house, bellowing, “There’s no one in here!” He didn’t need a president to tell him to conserve. He was too busy saving money.

Presidential exhortations to consumers may seem harmless, but they are not. They are noxious. Mr. Bush, mind your own business.

*Sheldon Richman is senior fellow at The Future of Freedom Foundation, author of **Tethered Citizens: Time to Repeal the Welfare State**, and editor of [The Freeman](#) magazine.*

This article was originally published in October 2005.