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Tax Revolts against Oppressive Governments **by Doug Bandow**

Tax Revolt: The Rebellion against an Overbearing, Bloated, Arrogant, and Abusive Government, by Phil Valentine (Nashville, Tenn.: Nelson Current, 2005), 256 pages.

More than a quarter century ago, Californians rebelled against an overbearing political establishment. Property assessments were climbing, state expenditures were rising, the budget surplus was expanding, and government officials were lying. Voters responded by passing Proposition 13, triggering tax revolts nationwide.

The movement has waxed and waned over the years, but the stories rarely cease to inspire. Popular resistance to higher taxes almost always reprises David versus Goliath. Such is the tale spun by Phil Valentine, a Tennessee talk-radio personality who helped stop the bipartisan drive for a state income tax. *Tax Revolt* offers a delightful read, detailing betrayal and deceit, insider maneuvers and public protests, and big-bucks lobbying and horn-honking rallies. Particularly satisfying is the end: the people win.

The story began in 1999, when the Republican governor, Don Sundquist, abandoned his anti-tax campaign pledge to push a state income tax. Sundquist was joined by the legislature's Democratic leadership and a who's who of special interests. It seemed only a matter of time before tax consumers overwhelmed taxpayers.

The campaign was based on two premises. First, only tax hikes could preserve vital programs. For instance, the teachers' union raised a hue and cry about protecting "children." Second, tax advocates played the demagoguery card, demonizing their revenue targets. In particular, they attacked businesses and wealthy individuals who supposedly weren't paying their "fair share."

But Sundquist made the mistake of challenging Valentine to read the budget and find programs to cut. The latter started asking questions. Why, for instance, was the state spending \$24

million for four new golf courses? Valentine and other citizens offered scores of money-saving tips. This was not what the governor or legislature wanted to hear.

As in California in 1978, the fiscal crisis, such as it was, reflected excessive government spending, and the tax increase was just going to provide more money to fund more special-interest projects. As popular opposition rose, the tax hikers realized that their only hope for victory was a combination of stealth and deceit.

Which is where Valentine begins his story. On Friday, June 9, 2000, Valentine received a phone call alerting him that the legislature planned an unpublicized Saturday session to rush the tax through. “This Saturday vote,” Valentine’s informants explained, “was not merely happenstance. It was a concerted effort ... to pull the wool over everyone’s eyes.”

Valentine had planned to go swimming with his son. But in a decision that changed Tennessee politics, Valentine, who normally hosted a weekday radio talk show, called his producer and arranged a special Saturday performance: “I knew I couldn’t live with myself if I didn’t at least put up a fight.”

Valentine joined with another talk-show host, Steve Gill, to set up outside the state capitol building. Thousands of citizens soon gathered. Hundreds of others circled the legislature honking their car horns. Plans for an immediate vote collapsed as nervous lawmakers dithered. The legislature reconvened on Monday, but Valentine and Gill, backed by more protestors and horn-honkers, also returned. Weeks, months, and years of political intrigue ensued. It’s a story that every citizen should read. Forget a thoughtful debate among statesmen over the merits of an important policy issue. The politicians and interest groups wanted more money. And they stopped at nothing to get it.

Valentine details the intricate legislative maneuvering that ensued. The saga is an entertaining political thriller: sneak attempts to hold a vote, threats and promises made to win support, vilification of opponents, brutish police tactics to curtail protests, fearful politicians cowering before their constituents, and political promises broken.

The end came on May 22, 2002, when — against the odds — the state House defeated the tax. After plotting for years, Democratic Speaker Jimmy Naifeh thought he had the vote wired. But Valentine and other talk-show hosts again called out the crowds. A few yes votes quavered, and Naifeh, after holding the vote open for nearly two hours, finally conceded defeat. Victory was sweet enough, but the political backwash was equally impressive. Some tax hikers retired. Others were defeated. Sundquist suffered political death, ignored by President Bush when he visited Tennessee in 2002 to campaign for Senate candidate Lamar Alexander.

Although the Tennessee story is the core of Valentine's book, he also surveys past tax revolts. He looks at the American Revolution, when the Sugar Act, Stamp Act, and Townshend Acts pushed Americans into military action against the greatest empire on earth. Early Americans also took up arms to right tax wrongs in Shays's Rebellion, the Whiskey Rebellion, and more. Citizen militancy, or at least a willingness to rebel over taxes, obviously has ebbed, but the spirit of rebellion remains. And Valentine devotes a chapter to more recent protests, beginning with Proposition 13. Not all initiatives win, but Valentine offers helpful advice on how to organize against the political establishment.

Taxes may be inevitable, but high taxes are not. As Valentine observes, "Low taxes, a good economy, and a great quality of life can certainly coexist."

But not if politicians have their way with disturbing regularity. Liberty requires eternal vigilance, warned Thomas Jefferson. We can all be thankful that the citizens about whom Phil Valentine writes took Jefferson's admonition seriously.

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