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## **What Do We Celebrate on the Fourth of July?**

**by Tibor R. Machan**

One way to appreciate the meaning of the Fourth of July is to reflect on what nearly every one of the Republican and Democratic presidential hopefuls focuses on in his or her interviews and speeches. Apart from Texas Representative Ron Paul, who is openly libertarian while running as a Republican, all the rest are embarking upon the standard Santa Claus theme of presidential politics. In other words, they are promising to create more entitlements for us, telling us that if they become president, we will be getting more goodies from the federal government.

Universal health care, higher minimum wages, subsidies to this industry and that, protection from foreign competitors and from immigrants — you name it, free goods and services, that's what they all promise us.

Sadly, they did not invent this Santa Claus ethos on their own. The bulk of the American public appears now to view politics primarily as the way to gain goodies at other people's expense. This is their hope, to elect someone who will favor the special interest group of which they are a member. Be one a farmer, small business owner, member of a union, educator, or entertainer, the hope is that whoever will take office once Bush departs will favor those like oneself with various precious benefits.

And since governments do not produce anything — the idea behind a proper government is that they stand guard against criminals and foreign invaders — the substance of this hope is that one can induce politicians to take from some citizens and hand over the loot to the favored ones.

Since, of course, there is only so much looting that can be done without hitting the bottom of the barrel, it's all a crap shoot, in the end. This is definitely the classic win-lose scenario, not the win-win kind we experience in the free market place. Yet, despite this very evident fact, the politicians are allowed to over-promise and the majority of voters hope they will be the lucky ones who will get something for nothing. Moreover, they all shameless call the loot "the public interest." But, to quote novelist Mark Helprin, "You can always make a case for the public interest if you are willing to exclude from common equity those whose rights you seek to abridge."

The Fourth of July, however, celebrates a drastically different kind of political idea. The crux of it is that government is instituted so as to secure everyone's basic rights—to life, liberty, the pursuit of happiness, and whatever follows from these. The Founders realized that that is the only true public interest!

The Declaration of Independence — the ideas and ideals of which are supposed to be the focus of the celebration on the Fourth of July—made no other promise to the people of the United States of America. At the time, however, the promise it did make—namely, that the basic rights of all citizens will be secured and government will stick to that task instead of meddling in people's lives like the former royal masters did—was very welcome. At that time most Americans remembered how rapacious and corrupt a government is that has near complete power over their lives. Monarchies, of course, were just the kind of governments that presumed to be in charge of everything within their dominion, within their realm of official authority.

So monarchies had to go.

Those who wrote the Declaration of Independence put the idea of monarchy to rest, buried it, in fact, because they realized it was based on a vicious misunderstanding of human nature. It rested on the notion that some people are good enough to govern others without the consent of those others. This idea of innate elitism was supposed to be abandoned in America. Lincoln put the point in crystal clear terms: “No man is good enough to govern another man, without that other's consent.” Instead the notion emerged, based on some of the most revolutionary political thinking in human history, that each person has certain unalienable rights and only by respecting those rights may others, including governments, interact with them. This kind of human equality — not equal entitlements to other people's hard work but to being equally free from other people's intrusiveness — marked the distinctiveness of the American political revolution. And this idea had, for a good while, guided much of the thinking in the country, so much so that some pretty awful institutions, such as slavery, the subjugation of women, and in time even conscription, would be abolished in their wake.

Unfortunately, the old, reactionary notion that government is not merely the guardian of human liberties but the nanny of us all — or even worse, our spiritual and economic Czar — resurfaced. Not enough Americans were vigilant enough in their loyalty to the ideals of the Declaration. Since there were compromises with those ideals from the start, instead of eradicating the older statist ideas that still lingered on, they built them up so that by the time FDR and his crew took the helm, the entire system started to return to the old ways whereby government became ruler instead of guardian. And today this is evident enough in how politicians approach their campaigns, namely, by promising to rule us and divvy up various privileges that the rulers have come to command. The idea of liberty is never even heard from anymore. From Obama to Hillary, from Giuliani to McCain, all we get is schemes, plans, and visions of how to provide us

with goodies that we will not have to work for but can obtain by having government steal it from other people.

All this is no surprise, of course, if one considers that throughout most of human history a great deal of wealth was not created by those who held it but confiscated from those who created it, too often at the point of a gun.

Conquest was the way to abundance. The upper classes looted the lower classes and one country's thugs conquered those of another and took what they could. That is how riches were achieved — the win-lose way.

Thousands of years saw little else but this kind of human relations, with the great majority of people left in poverty and a few living at their expense. This mindset is not easy to give up, so despite the fact that in a genuine free society wealth is created in the win-win fashion-with all earning and exchanging the results so everyone gets nearly exactly what he or she can bargain for-there is still this idea that we can all benefit by robbing a bunch of Peters and handing the loot over to a bunch of Pauls.

The Fourth of July is supposed to be celebrating the repudiation of this kind of social-economic life. It is supposed to celebrate the revolutionary-really, truly revolutionary-idea that peaceful exchange and interaction is the most efficient means to human flourishing. And for this the only job government needs to perform is to be a referee, to stand ready to adjudicate some of the expected misunderstandings, to resist the criminal inclinations that flare up, and to defend the citizenry from those abroad who refuse to play by the rules of peaceful commerce. I am not very optimistic for the near future but it seems to me that the message of the Declaration of Independence is too good, too sound, too right on the money to be lost on us for long and that in time it will resurface as the dominant political message not only in this country but everywhere. And indeed it does seem to be finding a favorable reception in some parts of the globe where the ways of looting and corruption have produced misery all around.

Slowly but surely, it seems to me, the ideas and ideals of the Fourth of July will triumph again.

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