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Would-Be Rulers without Clothes

by Sheldon Richman

In her CNN debate with Sen. Barack Obama in Texas, Sen. Hillary Clinton scoffed at the idea that buying medical insurance should be voluntary. “It would be as though Social Security were voluntary [or] Medicare, one of the great accomplishments of President Johnson, was voluntary.... We would not have a social compact with Social Security and Medicare if everyone did not have to participate. I want a universal health-care plan,” she said.

This is what passes for deep political thought these days. Look closely at what Clinton is saying. She wants something (“universal health care”); therefore people should be forced to give it to her. (No thought is given to how the free market could accomplish the goal peacefully.)

If you and I claimed something like that in private life, we’d be branded as boors. And if we took steps to accomplish it, we’d be arrested for theft or extortion.

Why are presidents and presidential candidates exempt from the normal and reasonable rules of morality? All of us are taught as children not to hit others, not to take their belongings without permission, and not to break our promises. If we need the cooperation of other people, we are expected to rely on persuasion. Force is forbidden. These are sound principles that underpin any decent society, and we are expected to observe them when we become adults. Indeed, the core criminal and civil law embody these principles in their prohibitions against murder, assault, burglary, theft, and breach of contract.

But when a politician advocates forcing the people to go along with her grand plans, the normal rules are suspended and different rules take their place. In the political world, people who have never bothered anyone may be coerced into participating in a politician’s scheme for no reason other than that the scheme allegedly won’t work if there isn’t universal participation.

Well, excuse me, but that’s not a good enough reason.

It’s a measure of how far removed politics is from normal morality that even to raise this issue seems slightly peculiar. Comparing a politician to a common criminal just isn’t done in polite society. But think about it. Imagine that Clinton was your neighbor and that she came up with an plan for a neighborhood association that would provide a variety of services, including

medical coverage and pensions. “My plan won’t work unless everyone participates,” she says. She proceeds to threaten anyone who decides not to go along. What would you think of this woman? If she demanded your money at gunpoint, you would call the cops.

So why the moral exemption for presidential candidates? Force is force. Does it matter who wields it? The fact is that someone who refuses to participate in government programs — Social Security, Medicare, universal health care — has not disturbed the peace. He has simply minded his own business. Thus the government should leave him alone. The “live and let live” principle used to be valued by the American people. But it’s been largely forgotten.

No one wants to face this issue. Where do government officials get the authority to compel peaceful people to finance and participate in their social programs? Some might reply that the authority comes from the people. But how can that be? We’ve already seen that you and I have no authority to initiate force against others. If we do it anyway, we are criminals. So how can all of us together have such authority? We can’t.

Americans have let their freedom slip away because they have failed to exercise simple logic and common sense. They have overlooked the fact that politicians can have no power not possessed by private individuals. They have swallowed the propaganda that all people are created equal, but that some are more equal than others. Americans have become like the subjects who were afraid to tell the emperor he was naked for fear of being thought stupid. And the politicians intent on exploiting us like this arrangement just fine.

Where is the courageous youth who shouts that the emperor — or empress — has no clothes?

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