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Inconsistent Conservatives and Progressives

by Sheldon Richman

Listening to the leading voices of conservatism and progressivism, one gets the feeling they are not quite listening to themselves. On any given day you are likely to hear each side make arguments against the other that fully apply to itself in some area of public policy.

Progressives, for example, tend to be critical (though imperfectly so) of the military side of government. They approach all claims in favor of militarism, invasion, and occupation with a healthy skepticism. To their credit, they understand that government's national-security apparatus is a blunt instrument with a comparative advantage in violence and destruction. Television commentators, such as Keith Olbermann and Rachel Maddow, have expressed disappointment that President Obama has not moved more firmly to reverse the military and intelligence policies of George W. Bush.

Similarly, the progressives scrutinize every government activity in the national-security area that has any potential to impinge on civil liberties, including those of so-called illegal immigrants. Nothing raises their ire like government surveillance and heavy-handed police activity. They are also the first to protest when government interferes with free speech and the freedom to assemble.

On the other side, conservatives tend to be critical (if imperfectly so) of government interference with people's property and economic activities. A proposal to raise taxes or spending, or a seizure of land under eminent domain, is sure to bring an outcry from that side of the political spectrum. The leading conservative media personalities, such as Rush Limbaugh and Sean Hannity, have been relentless critics of President Obama's effort to have government further control the medical and medical-insurance industries. Not only do they emphasize the huge expense and growing debt that any such overhaul would require; they also argue that our rights to privacy and free choice would inevitably be subordinated to bureaucratic directives.

The problem is that conservatives and progressives fail to see that their arguments can legitimately be applied to government activity across the board, including activities they like. If each side were consistent, it would oppose many things it now favors.

Conservatives, for example, fail to see how their property, privacy, and fiscal concerns apply to national-security policy. The U.S. government cannot assume the role of world policeman without heavy taxation and borrowing; without distorting the civilian economy; and without relaxing the safeguards on civil liberties.

Similarly, most conservatives enthusiastically support “the drug war” and “energy independence,” although virtually every argument they use against the health-care grab and other economic intervention applies to those government objectives.

The progressives are no more consistent. Why are political thinkers who are so concerned about government intrusion by the CIA and FBI so unconcerned about intrusion by Health and Human Services? Why are they so willing to trust bureaucrats with lowering the country’s medical bill when that is an open invitation to rationing and other controls? Why do they generally object to big institutions’ pushing individuals around — but favor forcing people to buy government-defined medical insurance? And why do they ridicule as paranoid anyone concerned about empowering bureaucrats to second-guess doctors and patients? Is that any more paranoid than worrying about what the CIA and the National Security Agency are up to?

The fact is, by the standard of individual autonomy and freedom both kinds of activity should inspire wariness and fierce opposition. As bureaucracy grows, freedom shrinks. It makes little difference whether the bureaucracy is fighting an ill-defined open-ended “war on terror” or taking control of the medical industry. There are grave perils to liberty in both missions.

As George Washington is reputed to have acknowledged, “Government is not reason; it is not eloquence. It is force.” More often than not, that force is wielded by agents of the U.S. government against innocent people at home and abroad. The drug war is an example. So is the occupation of Afghanistan and other superpower activities. So is eminent domain. And so is government orchestration of the practice of medicine.

Unlike their political opponents, libertarians (the original liberals) see the need to apply their political-moral principles consistently, to all government actions. Why don’t the conservatives and progressives?

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