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April Is the Cruellest Month

by Sheldon Richman

Taxes. Fiscal force. It's that time again.

This is the month you are ordered to reduce your financial life to a series of complex tax forms and get them in to the IRS (which, by the way, can't keep its own records in order). The authorities are waiting to hear from you. Don't be late. Don't fail to tell all. Don't err.

Not a pleasant subject. And why should it be? Taxation is legalized robbery, compulsory tribute, exaction. The government does not ask your consent, and as far as it is concerned, none is needed. It wants a healthy portion of what you earned last year. You pay under penalty of confiscation, imprisonment, even death. (No exaggeration there. Try refusing the taxman and then defending your property when the armed agents show up at your door.)

The description of taxation as theft applies to any tax. Let's face it, there is no sense in which you or I consented — without duress — to this voracious monster we call the federal government.

The most egregious tax is the income tax. Any tax intended to raise nearly \$2 trillion will be draconian, but an income tax is most oppressive. For one thing, people will always be tempted to hide their income. Nothing is more human than the wish to keep what one has earned. But the government will go to great lengths to prevent that. The complexity of the code gives government great scope for intrusion. Each touted legislative effort to simplify the tax somehow makes it more complicated. Everyone is a lawbreaker. The taxman knows it and we know it. The system is based on terror, which is unbecoming a theoretically free people. To rub salt in the wound, the government compels employers to withhold the tax before we even get our hands on it.

There is something especially repugnant about the government's demanding that we report how much money we make and where it comes from. It is the income tax that has made financial privacy an object of nostalgia. The Founding Fathers would be appalled. They abhorred inquisitorial government. Yet that is what the Sixteenth Amendment has delivered us to.

Today the federal government takes a record peacetime amount of the people's income, more than 20 percent. The budget-makers brag about the coming surpluses. But do they talk about

dramatically cutting or repealing taxes? Republicans use tax-cutting language ritualistically, but it doesn't get much beyond that. President Bush's plan wouldn't even undo his father's promise-breaking tax hike. Democrats have a pathological fear that a tax cut would benefit the "rich" (who pay most of the income tax) more than the "poor." Besides, they have too many other things to do with your money than to let you keep it. They have to "save" Social Security, pay down the national debt, increase spending on education, build up the military, and a dozen other things. None would be as beneficial to Americans or America as a repeal of the income tax.

Truth be told, government does not serve the "general welfare." It is just a cynical transfer machine: politicians take what A produces and give it to B. The B's are well-organized interest groups, the A's the unorganized majority. The system is designed to keep incumbents living in the manner to which they have become accustomed. They buy votes by distributing booty. (Don't be fooled by so-called campaign-finance reform.)

The only lasting remedy is a dismantling of the transfer machine we benignly call the welfare state. The pillars of the welfare state, the income tax and the Sixteenth Amendment that authorizes it, must go.

In all the public discussion of the income tax, the key fact gets lost: It's your money. You work for it. You earn it. It's your property. Only you have a right to it. You never freely agreed to surrender it.

We've come a long way since small tea and stamp taxes fueled revolutionary thoughts in our forefathers.

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