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Book Review — Against Leviathan by George C. Leef

Against Leviathan: Government Power and a Free Society by Robert Higgs
(Independent Institute, 2004); 405 pages; \$18.95.

Readers familiar with the writings of the 16th-century English philosopher Thomas Hobbes will immediately understand the thrust of this exceptional book. Hobbes attempted to justify an all-powerful state as being necessary if people were to avoid the supposed terrors of “the state of nature.” He called his model government (an unlimited monarchy) the Leviathan. Like many moderns, Hobbes erred in simultaneously overestimating the problems of freedom and underestimating the problems of government. The U.S. Constitution was, of course, an effort to avoid the Leviathan state by placing strict limits on governmental authority. Alas, constitutional restraints on governmental authority have been largely eviscerated by Supreme Court justices sympathetic to the socialistic vision of a highly planned and regulated society, and we have been moving towards Leviathan for more than a century.

Historian Robert Higgs is as steadfast an opponent of governmental interference with liberty as one will ever find. In *Against Leviathan*, he has collected 40 of his trenchant essays that deal with a wide array of topics pertaining to state power. As he explains in his introduction, he has arrived at the conclusion that government in the United States is mostly a useless, parasitic growth that thrives only because few people are able to see through its web of deception. Here is what he says:

If I had to use a single word to describe what is fundamentally wrong with government today, I would use the word *fraud*. Certainly nowadays — perhaps in every age — government is not what it claims to be (competent, protective, and just), and it is what it claims not to be (bungling, menacing, and unjust).

In actuality, it is a vast web of deceit and humbug, and not for a good purpose, either. Indeed, its true purposes are as reprehensible as its noble claims are false.

Its stock in trade is pretense. The velvet glove of its countless claims of benevolence scarcely conceals its iron fist of violence and threats of more violence. It wants to be loved, but it will settle for being feared. The one thing it will not do is simply leave us alone.

Strong words indeed, but I defy anyone to read the book and then provide a serious argument that all the politicians and bureaucrats who now run our lives to such a great extent are doing so because they're so committed to making life better for all of us. Our latter-day Hobbesians will shrink away from this book like vampires from garlic.

Against Leviathan is divided into seven sections: "Welfare Statism"; "Our Glorious Leaders"; "Despotism, Soft and Hard"; "Economic Disgraces"; "The Political Economy of Crisis"; "Retreat of the State?"; and "Review of the Troops." It wouldn't be possible to do justice to the scope of Higgs's erudition even if I had a whole issue of *Freedom Daily* for the review. All I can do is to provide a tour through some of the material I find most memorable and encourage the reader to get the book and see for himself whether Higgs hasn't produced the best all-out attack on big government in years.

The first essay in the book is a well-chosen initial broadside. In "Is More Economic Equality Better?" Higgs takes on one of the central assumptions of modern liberalism, namely that the closer to perfect equality in individual wealth and income in a society, the more just that society is. To the welfare-state egalitarians, the author replies that

the societal distribution of income or wealth itself, whatever else it might happen to be, is morally neutral: neither an increase nor a decrease in the degree of inequality has any unambiguous moral meaning. Everything hinges on *why* the distribution changes.

Higgs proceeds to show that there could be numerous reasons for an increase in equality (he devises seven scenarios, but there could be far more), all of which would be undesirable except for the ridiculous allure of egalitarianism. He concludes by nailing down the intellectual error that underlies the mania for income equality, namely the anthropomorphosis of society — that is, viewing society as if it were a human being itself, capable of moral choice and action. "Society is nothing more than an abstraction, a concept, an intellectual invention," he writes.

Just as only individuals are moral agents, capable of purposive goal-seeking behavior, so only individuals are moral agents, whose actions we may properly describe as ethical or unethical.

By demolishing the central precept of the notion of “social justice,” Higgs obliterates the intellectual fortification that protects much of the Leviathan’s actions.

Presidential “greatness”

The book’s section “Our Glorious Leaders” will provoke plenty of outrage among conventional historians, for Higgs throws down the gauntlet to their penchant for regarding as “great,” presidents who were stupendous failures. Franklin D. Roosevelt has been turned into a revered figure by admiring statists. Textbooks covering American history in the 20th century invariably fawn over his supposed achievements. I’d dearly love to sneak a copy of Higgs’s chapter “The Mythology of Roosevelt and the New Deal” into every American history text. The students would discover that FDR was nothing more than a political conniver who “did not trouble himself with serious thinking.” His vaunted “brain trust” consisted of men whose “ideas about the causes and cure of the depression ranged from merely wrongheaded to completely crackpot.” Most important, Higgs hits the bull’s-eye with his explanation for the continuing relevance of FDR’s New Deal:

The legacy of the New Deal was, more than anything else, a matter of ideological change. Henceforth, nearly everyone would look to the federal government for solutions to problems great and small, real and imagined, personal as well as social.

When it comes to presidential “greatness,” Higgs gives his readers a completely contrarian assessment. “I hold no brief for John Quincy Adams, Martin Van Buren, or Chester Arthur, but I think we ought to give them their due: at least they did not spill the blood of their fellow citizens,” he writes.

Harding’s Teapot Dome affair is but a drop in the ocean of malfeasance compared to the global horrors set in train by Wilson’s decision to take the United States into World War I. Why do the historians, and following them the public, place on pedestals the leaders responsible for such monumental catastrophes?

Higgs’s favorite president? None of the so-called greats, but instead Grover Cleveland, who “respected the Constitution, acknowledging that the national government has only a limited mission to perform.” I wish someone would arrange a debate between Bob Higgs and any of our run-of-the-mill historians on the subject of presidential greatness.

Government's useless statistics

Another gem that, to my mind, stands out in the book is Higgs's argument that we would be better off without all the official government statistics. Americans are bombarded almost daily with statistics on the poverty rate, unemployment rate, trade deficit, and so forth. Our author does not merely quibble that this or that statistic is imperfectly collected or analyzed, but argues forcefully that they should not be collected *at all*. He writes,

A just government, one that confines itself to protecting the citizens' rights to life, liberty, and property, has no need for figures on the distribution of personal income; no need for data on international trade and finance; no need for national income and product accounts.

All of those statistics, Higgs explains, serve as pretexts for endless government meddling in our lives. I remember a "mainstream" economist some years ago defending the federal government's production of reams of statistics by saying that "we couldn't do public policy without them." Higgs would reply, "Dump the statistics and the public policy in the circular file."

While his attacks on Leviathan's incursions into domestic policy are extremely sharp — the Food and Drug Administration, the "war on drugs," the growth of Puritanism and its long list of victimless crimes, and much more comes under Higgs's critical gaze — our author seems to reserve his toughest language for the government's needless militarism. In "War and Leviathan in Twentieth-Century America," he contends that conscription has been the keystone to the growth of state power. "In a multitude of ways," he writes,

the military draft shaped not only the contours of the nation at war but the course of its politicoeconomic development throughout the past eighty years.

Knowing that the draft would make it possible for the government to raise an enormous army quickly and at low cost, Woodrow Wilson plunged the nation into World War I. Not only was the carnage horrific, but government expanded its powers enormously. Some, but not all of those powers were dropped at the end of World War I, but they were immediately resumed and again increased during World War II. Ironically, the military draft itself is gone (although the idea is far from dead and there is reason to fear its resurrection), but its legacy of bloated federal control remains with us. No doubt about it — war is indeed the health of the state.

Surveying the political landscape he has so ably painted, Higgs is not optimistic about our future. The culture of obedience to big government is, he fears, too deeply imbedded in America for there to be much hope of a return to a free society. He says, in my view correctly, that "few people in the United States today really give a damn about living as free men and women. After a century of fighting a losing battle against their own governments, the American people have

finally accepted that the best course open to them is simply to label their servitude as freedom and concentrate on enjoying the creature comforts that the government still permits them to possess.

Still, there is a Nockian remnant in America, trying hard to convince the rest of the populace that Big Government is a snare and a delusion. With *Against Leviathan*, Bob Higgs has made that task a bit easier.

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