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A Conflict of Paradigms

by Jacob G. Hornberger

Understanding the true nature of a free society entails asking ourselves two basic questions: What does it actually mean to be free, and what is the legitimate role of government in a free society? Reflecting on those two fundamental questions might provide the way out of the political and economic morass in which our nation finds itself.

Let us first return to basic principles. Our Founding Fathers brought into existence the most unusual society in history. Imagine: No income taxation, Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid, welfare, compulsory schooling, drug laws, gun control, paper money, travel restrictions, or central bank. Not even any immigration controls.

Americans once engaged in occupations or businesses without licenses, permits, or regulations. They were free to enter into mutually beneficial trades with others without governmental interference. With no taxation on income, they were able to accumulate unlimited amounts of wealth and to decide how to dispose of it. Their standard of living soared, especially in comparison with the rest of the world.

Americans traveled anywhere in the country and all over the world without government approval or supervision. Indeed, they didn't even have passports.

There was no involvement in European or Asiatic wars taking the lives of countless American men. No conscription, except for the War Between the States. No militarism or glorification of military armaments. Rejecting big professional armies, Americans embraced the concept of citizen-soldiers: a nation of civilians who trained themselves to fight and who were prepared to do so if America was ever invaded.

This unusual way of life is what Americans understood by the term "freedom." This is the freedom that Americans celebrated every Fourth of July. This is what it once meant to be an American. This is what it once meant to be free.

What guided Americans in the late 1700s and throughout most of the 1800s was one overriding principle: the greatest threat to their freedom and well-being lay with their own federal government. They believed that the stronger and more powerful the government, the less free the

people and the weaker the nation. Conversely, the weaker the government, the freer the people and the stronger the nation.

Thus, they used the Constitution to call into existence the weakest and most restricted national government in history.

What was the result of this weak, restricted government with few powers over the lives and fortunes of the citizenry? The most economically powerful nation in history ... and the most prosperous nation in history ... and the most charitable nation in history ... and the freest nation in history.

Although there were major and minor exceptions, that was the paradigm of freedom on which our nation was founded and which guided it for more than a century.

Unfortunately, that is no longer the paradigm under which Americans now operate.

The current paradigm

Today, Americans suffer under a system whose features are the ones that our ancestors rejected. People's income is now subject to unlimited taxation, and the more people earn the more the government takes.

The primary role of the federal government is now to take care of people with the money that the federal government collects from them in taxes and borrows from them through the sale of government securities, which fuels inflation. Such welfare programs as Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid, education grants, and business subsidies are now an established part of American life.

The federal government has the power to regulate the most minute aspects of people's economic activities, even extending to what people grow or consume on their own property.

Since the early part of the 20th century, Americans have suffered the ravages of irredeemable paper money as well as a central bank that has, decade after decade, gradually debased the currency, enabling government officials to confiscate people's wealth and savings through inflation.

Involvement in foreign wars is now an accepted part of American life, and has resulted in the deaths or maiming of hundreds of thousands of American men and women. An enormous standing military force has become a permanent feature of American life — an imperial force that extends throughout the world, requiring ever-increasing amounts of tax money to finance. While military service has been voluntary since the Vietnam War, everyone knows that forcible conscription of the citizenry is a permanent standby option.

What are the results of this modern-day welfare-state, warfare-state paradigm? The most powerful government in history! A government able to provide welfare for millions of Americans and foreigners alike. A military force potentially capable of conquering any individual nation in the world. An executive with the power to send military forces into action across the globe on his

own initiative. A government with the power to jail anyone anywhere forever without charges. The world's "only remaining superpower!"

A weak and frightened nation

There has been a major negative result of all this, however: As our ancestors knew would be the case, this all-powerful federal government has produced one of the weakest and most frightened nations in history.

The welfare state has produced a mindset of almost hopeless dependency among the American people. Just utter the phrase "repeal Social Security" to anyone over 65 and you'll see exactly what I mean. Nearly every American over 65 will go into a state of nervous shock upon hearing that phrase. "How would I ever survive without my Social Security?" is how they respond, ignoring the quite obvious fact that Americans survived — and prospered — without such a socialist scheme for the first 125 years of our nation's history.

This mindset of welfare-state dependency, however, is not limited to the elderly. It pervades the minds of people throughout American society, transcending all age groups and economic classes. Just use the term "repeal" in the context of any discussion regarding Medicare, Medicaid, education grants, unemployment compensation, food stamps, public housing, or business subsidies, and you will see what I mean.

Despite the devotion to the principles of free enterprise that they ostensibly learned in their public (i.e., government) schools, Americans are terrified of the free market. Just suggest to them, for example, the idea of separating school and state and turning education over completely to the free market and you'll see what I mean. Or ask them how they feel about a free market in the consumption and sale of drugs.

The fact is that Americans have lost confidence in themselves and in others. They've lost faith in freedom and the free market. And they are a terrified people. Americans are terrified of losing their welfare. They are terrified of losing their jobs. They are terrified of foreigners, especially immigrants who might out-compete them or "take their jobs away." They are terrified of the "terrorists," which is why federal officials always trot out that term — "terrorists" — whenever they want to terrify the people into blindly supporting whatever they're doing.

What they're not scared of, unfortunately, is their own federal government — their benefactor, their caretaker, their provider. The federal government has assumed the role of their parent — or even their god. It takes care of them and protects them from the "bad guys." And heaven help the person, especially an American, who dares to say bad things about their federal parent or federal god!

Militarism and “toughness”

The warfare state has produced a perverse sense of vicarious toughness — one in which citizens express courage through the conduct of their all-powerful government, especially its military forces. “We’ve got to invade Iraq and get Saddam — we can’t be weak!” is a typical cry — one in which the “we” is the professional soldier who is going to be doing the fighting and dying thousands of miles away, as the citizenry “support the troops” by cheering retired army generals explaining U.S. overseas military action on television and by placing “support the troops” stickers on their cars. Military victories are celebrated by everyone and reflect our collective toughness as a nation. Militarism and military armaments are glorified. And everyone who lives near a military base is terrified that it might be closed down.

The welfare-warfare paradigm has resulted in the most powerful government in history and quite possibly the most dependent, terrified nation in history.

Ironically, all of this is seen as the new “freedom” — the freedom to be taken care of and protected by an all-powerful, all-good federal government and to be made good, compassionate, courageous, and caring through the collective welfare-warfare force of the government. Just witness people’s reaction to the federal aid recently given the tsunami victims: the more money U.S. officials committed each passing day in response to foreign criticism of “our” being too stingy, the more the American people viewed themselves in a positive light. Or consider one of the many reasons for invading Iraq — to “liberate” the Iraqi people, reflecting our collective goodness as Americans. We’re good because the government is good with the money that it has taken from all of us and provided to others in the form of welfare or warfare.

Reform or freedom?

There are those who say that the welfare-warfare state is here to stay, that we might as well resign ourselves and accept it, and that we should simply devote ourselves to reforming it and improving it. This sad feeling of resignation applies not only to the domestic welfare state but also to the foreign warfare state.

With respect to the welfare-state, think about how many times you have read an article or a study issued by some free-enterprise group that concludes with what has become a standard bromide: “The system needs reform.”

With respect to the warfare state, think about how many free-enterprise advocates jumped on the federal “war on terrorism” bandwagon and the war on Iraq without even considering the consequences with respect to the freedom of the American people.

In order to achieve a free society, it is imperative to confront two truths:

First and foremost, the political-economic paradigm under which Americans live today is opposite to the political-economic paradigm under which our forefathers lived and upon which our nation was founded. This is important because obviously opposites cannot be the same.

Either our ancestors were free or they were not, and if they were free, then how can we — their successors — be free when we live under opposite principles? The profound words of Goethe come to mind here — that none are more hopelessly enslaved than those who falsely believe they are free.

Second, it is impossible to achieve a free society by simply reforming the welfare-warfare paradigm, even if the reforms are packaged in free-enterprise verbiage. (Again, think of Goethe's observation.) He who has resigned himself to the inevitability of the welfare-warfare paradigm has given up the quest for a free society. For there is no way to achieve the genuine freedom that our ancestors enjoyed under a paradigm in which the federal government has the omnipotent power to tax people, regulate people, take care of people, jail people, and send them into war for any reason whatsoever.

A nation which has embraced the welfare-warfare paradigm, no matter how reformed and improved, will be an unfree nation of weak, dependent, terrified people. As our forefathers understood so well, the only way to achieve a free society and a strong nation is to rein in the federal government and weaken it.

Can the paradigm of freedom, free markets, and limited government be restored to our land? Of course it can. After all, if a hundred years after the nation's founding, Americans could be persuaded to adopt a paradigm of socialism, interventionism, and empire, then why isn't it possible to convince a critical mass of Americans living today to reject that paradigm and restore the paradigm of our forefathers? Ideas are among the most powerful forces in the universe, which is why governments spend so much time, energy, and resources attempting to suppress them.

With the manifest failure of virtually every aspect of the welfare-warfare paradigm — from Social Security to the drug war to the “war on terrorism” to the war on Iraq — the time could well be approaching when Americans begin asking the important questions that our Founding Fathers asked: What does it mean to be free, and what is the legitimate role of government in a free society?

If that day comes, let us hope that Americans do not settle for reforming or improving the current paradigm of socialism, interventionism, and empire, but instead decide to restore the paradigm of freedom, free markets, and republic on which our nation was founded.

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This article was originally published in the August 2005 edition of *Freedom Daily*.