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The War No One Mentions

by Jacob G. Hornberger

With all the campaign talk about the various wars in which America is involved — the war on Iraq, the war on drugs, the war on poverty, the war on illiteracy, the war on terrorism, and the war on Afghanistan — there is one war that goes unacknowledged and unspoken about in American society: the war on income and wealth that Americans are waging against each other. It is a war in which Americans are doing everything they can to take away money that belongs to other Americans, while at the same time doing everything they can to protect their own money from being taken from them. It is an immoral war being waged by immoral means, and it threatens to rip apart the moral and economic fabric of our society.

Most Americans, regardless of political philosophy, agree that government has certain important minimal functions, such as the investigation and prosecution of violent crime, the maintenance of a judicial process that enables people to resolve disputes, and the defense of the nation against a military invasion.

That raises the issue of how such functions should be funded. Some people argue that taxation is necessary to fund such important activities. Others say that given that people do believe such functions are so important, they can be relied on to voluntarily support them.

Let's leave that debate aside. That's not the issue I'm referring to. I'm referring to the war in which Americans are battling hard to get into the pocketbooks of other Americans, take their money, and pocket it for themselves or distribute it to others.

Sometimes the warriors are on the offensive — attacking, plundering, and looting their fellow Americans. Sometimes they're on the defensive, looking for every possible way to protect their own pocketbooks from being plundered and looted. But make no mistake about: While few talk openly about the war, it is a vicious one and it is an ongoing one.

Grants for your community

Let's first consider one of the most visible manifestations of this war, one involving the members of Congress. From the time they are elected to office until the next election, most

congressmen spend inordinate amounts of time on one important task — bringing federal grants back to their congressional districts. Such grants, which are often announced amidst much fanfare and publicity, usually involve millions of dollars. As an election approaches, the number and size of the grants inevitably increase.

To the electorate in his district, the congressman is a hero, even a savior. How was that new community center going to be built? How was that bridge going to be constructed? The new sports arena? The new library? Alas, without their congressional hero and savior, the citizenry were just going to have to do without such things.

But then the congressman rides into town announcing that through his knowledge, expertise, experience, hard work, and longevity in office, he has been able to procure federal grants to pay for those things.

The people celebrate, and they praise and honor their hard-working congressman with banquets, letters, and plaques. They convince themselves that they have the most effective congressman in the country.

In fact, for most voters the measure of success for their congressman is how much federal money he is able to bring home to his constituents. That's why people continue to reelect their congressman, time after time, despite their general dissatisfaction with Congress. People know that a congressman who has been in office longer will be able to bring home more federal grants than a newly elected, less powerful one.

Let's carefully analyze this process because it will enable us to gain a better understanding of the war that Americans are waging against each other.

Let's assume that your congressman has announced a \$10 million grant to help construct a new community center in your town. That money has to come from somewhere. Where does it come from? It comes from the IRS, which has collected it from citizens all over the country. That's what April 15 is all about — the day by which Americans are required to file income-tax returns and pay any income taxes that are still owing and unpaid from the previous year.

All those income taxes go into a giant pool of money that the members of Congress then divvy up. The new members of Congress usually get less of the largess, while the more-established members get more.

What matters though is that every member of Congress who wants grants is going to be given at least a few of them, so that he can return to his district and proudly demonstrate what an effective congressman he is, to the applause, acclaim, and awe of the voters as well as the local press.

Looters and looted

Now, there's an important point to recognize about this process. The congressman must make his constituents think the money is either free or that it's coming from Americans living far

away, preferably in other states. After all, if people were to figure out the grant is simply a return of the income taxes that they and their neighbors have paid to the IRS, they might not consider their congressman to be such a hero or savior after all, especially if people realize that the money isn't even being returned to them directly but instead is being given to some politically influential person or group in the community.

So when a congressman in Oklahoma announces a multimillion-dollar federal grant for people in his district, the idea is that this free money is coming from, say, people in Virginia. That way, taking people's money to feather their own nest won't feel as bad or immoral as it might if they were doing it to their friends and neighbors. Of course, people in Virginia are hearing the same thing from their congressmen, only they're being convinced that the free money is coming from, say, the people of Oklahoma.

The process, of course, is just one small part of this very big unspoken war that Americans are waging against each other. Ever since the 1930s, the primary purpose of the federal government has been to tax nearly everyone in order to develop a giant pool of resources to dole out to selected recipients of the money.

That's what those lobbyists in Washington are all about. Wealthy companies and individuals all across America want to get their hands on some of that pool of IRS-collected loot, so they hire lobbyists to get the job done for them, in return for paying them handsome amounts of money for their efforts. The lobbyists, many of whom are former members of Congress, curry favor with congressmen, greasing their palms with well-paid junkets, in the hope that their efforts will result in a federal grant to their clients, a grant that has been funded indirectly by the hard-earned monies that the American people have dutifully sent the IRS.

The entitlements war

Another big part of this unspoken war is Social Security and other "entitlement" programs.

Retired people who are living on Social Security like to say that they're just getting back what they "paid into" the system. The truth is that Social Security is a straight confiscate-and-transfer program, one in which old people are waging war against the young and productive. The elderly don't like to speak about it in those terms, but that is exactly what they are doing.

With Social Security, the federal government forces young people to send a portion of their income to the Social Security Administration. That money is not placed into a savings account or a lockbox. Instead, that's the money that is sent to current Social Security recipients.

In other words, the elderly are using the federal government to dip into the pocketbooks of the young and the productive, take their money, and use it for themselves. Ironically, many Social Security recipients don't even need the money, making this part of the war even more immoral and disgraceful, especially since many of the young people they're taking the money from are struggling to support their families.

What happened to the money that current Social Security recipients “paid into” the system? It’s long gone. The people who took that money are now dead. Those dead people took the same position that current Social Security recipients took: “I put it in and I’ve got a right to take it out.” In reality, they didn’t “put anything in.” When they were young and productive, the elderly waged war on them by taking their money to fund their retirement. In retaliation, the current elderly are now doing the same thing to their children’s and grandchildren’s generations.

The war is the same with respect to Medicare and Medicaid. One sector of society is plundering and looting another sector of society in order to fund health-care expenses.

At the local level, the war is waged with as much ferocity and viciousness as it is at the national level, even though it too remains undiscussed. The best example is public (i.e., government) schooling. Here, people who have children have convinced themselves that they have a moral right to take money from people who don’t have children in order to pay for the schooling of their children. They employ the force of government to plunder and loot the wealth of their neighbors to build their government schools, pay their government schoolteachers, and finance other expenses associated with the government schooling of their children.

Frédéric Bastiat, a 19th-century French legislator, perfectly described the nature of the government in which Americans are living today. He said, “The state is that great fiction by which everyone endeavors to live at the expense of everyone else.”

Is there another way? Of course there is. There is a way based on simple moral principles: Everyone keeps his own money. Everyone decides what to do with his own money. No income tax. No IRS. No government grants or assistance to anyone. All charity is voluntary.

It’s called freedom. It’s a peaceful, harmonious way of life, one that Americans once believed in.

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