



11350 Random Hills Road, Suite 800, Fairfax, Virginia 22030 Phone (703) 934-6101 Fax (703) 352-3678

fff@fff.org www.fff.org

Sacrificing Liberty for Safety **by George C. Leef**

[Neither Liberty Nor Safety](#) by Robert Higgs (Independent Institute, 2007); 202 pages.

Many readers will immediately recognize that the title of this book comes from one of Benjamin Franklin's many political insights: "Those who would sacrifice essential liberty to purchase a little temporary safety deserve neither liberty nor safety." Author Robert Higgs agrees with Franklin's judgment, but the point of his powerful and iconoclastic book is that when people turn to the state crying for safety, they will end up sacrificing their liberty in vain. They will *get* neither liberty nor safety. The modern state takes people's liberty (as well as a lot of their property) but delivers to them increased insecurity.

It's a great trick — a con job of monumental proportions. Politicians promise the people safety from everything from vicious terrorists to the rapacious greed of capitalists. The trouble is that the one tool of politics — coercion — cannot produce safety from anything. The great mass of people are being bamboozled.

Now, this is a very radical, cynical view of government and Higgs tells us that he didn't always hold government in the low esteem he now does. In his younger days, he accepted much of the conventional wisdom about government — beliefs carefully inculcated by apologists for statism. Fortunately for us, as Higgs writes, "My lifelong learning has been a sloughing off of orthodoxy and 'respectable views.'" He is a scholar who questions even the most deeply ingrained ideas about our history, politics, and economics. If we ever get to the point where the Supreme Court interprets the First Amendment to mean that "Congress shall make no law abridging freedom of the press, unless it finds some compelling reason to do so," this book will be put near the top of the banned list.

The first myth about government that Higgs attacks is that it exists by consent to serve the populace. Politicians and their hangers-on work assiduously to keep the idea of the social contract in people's minds. Rulers from ancient times right up to the present have understood that their power becomes more secure and enjoyable if the masses can be made to believe that the

government's depredations against them are actually for their own good. Here, Higgs isn't breaking new ground (and he always acknowledges his intellectual debts), but the point is crucial. If large numbers of Americans began to see that they're being robbed blind and bossed around like children in a Dickensian orphanage just so that politicians and sycophantic interest groups can live well at their expense, the government would face a crisis of legitimacy. But it doesn't, because hardly anyone can penetrate its innumerable layers of deception.

And for those few who do, the government keeps handy its ultimate tool — fear. Public opinion, Higgs contends, is not really the bedrock of government. Fear is. Disobey any of the vast number of mandates and prohibitions the state has decreed, and you'll face fines, prison, or even execution. So the government isn't just a swindle by some conniving rogues. It's more like a heavily armed gang that will readily use violence if it has to.

That certainly is a different view, but why believe it? Is this Higgs fellow just some malcontent who has an ax to grind because of a nasty experience with the IRS? Come on — the government isn't as bad as all that — is it?

The First World War

In support of his position, Higgs presents a great deal of history to demonstrate that government officials are not our servants, don't have our best interests at heart, and usually make things worse for us. He concentrates especially on the period from World War I to the decade after World War II.

First, he shows that there was no necessity for the United States to have entered World War I, but doing so was useful to various groups, particularly "the Progressives." They saw the war as a fabulous opportunity to break down traditional American ideas about property rights and individuality. The war did nothing for the 117,000 soldiers who were killed or the many more who were wounded. It did nothing for the taxpayers who were bilked to pay for it. But it was immensely satisfying to the intellectuals who were intent on fastening their system of social control on America.

Most of us never hear anything but praise for Wilson's war — how "we" beat the terrible Huns and brought peace to Europe. Higgs presents a radically different view certain to shock but that may get some people thinking that they've been deceived by the standard account.

The Great Depression

Then we come to the "Roaring 20s" and the Depression. The usual narrative depicts the government as having rescued the country from the "excesses of capitalism" with its wise New Deal policies. Most Americans have been taught that the government was doing the right thing for the people, perhaps taking away just a bit of liberty but in return giving them a lot of economic security.

Higgs shows that notion to be pure bunk. The speculative bubble was the result of Federal Reserve policy designed to drive down interest rates in the United States in order to help take the pressure off the overvalued British pound. (Capital had been fleeing Britain, but if U.S. interest rates were lowered, the outflow would be reduced.) All this high-level financial manipulation was hardly done for the interest of ordinary Americans. Higgs nicely explains the Austrian theory of the business cycle here — the artificially low interest rates led people to invest in things they otherwise would not have. But when the Fed reversed its expansionist policy in 1929, the result was the famous stock market crash.

So, Higgs, you're saying that the Depression wasn't caused by capitalism, but instead by the government? Hmmmmm...

As the country slid into the Depression, President Hoover may have sincerely believed that his many interventions would pull the country out, but his Progressive beliefs played perfectly into the hands of interest groups that saw the Depression just as they had seen the war, namely as an excuse to move further away from the free-market order and impose the “rationality” of central planning.

Far from curing the Depression, Higgs explains, Roosevelt's New Deal prolonged and deepened it. Instead of doing things that would have allowed or even hastened the natural process of economic recovery — such as cutting taxes and government spending — Roosevelt and his “Brain Trust” indulged in an orgy of socialistic experimentation. *They* were thrilled to be able to tinker with long-established liberty and property rights, but the consequences for hungry, unemployed Americans were tragic.

(A point that Higgs might have added here was that the government, always eager to manipulate public opinion, paid for theatrical productions intended to demonize business owners and paint Democratic officeholders as saviors. Amity Schlaes noted the New Dealers' penchant for propaganda in her book *The Forgotten Man*, which [I reviewed](#) for *Freedom Daily*, December 2007.)

You mean that the New Deal reduced freedom in America while at the same time making most of the people worse off? Gee — that's not the way I heard it in school.

The book proceeds to challenge the accepted pro-state ideas on the need for American involvement in World War II, the continuing large military expenditures during the Cold War, the mushrooming of federal programs and controls during Lyndon Johnson's “Great Society,” and more, right up to our “war on terrorism.” All of that history further supports Higgs's argument that the U.S. government is mostly a great fraud that deprives Americans of liberty and property to enrich the interest groups that feed at the public trough. Americans who love peace and prosperity and hate subjugation and exploitation should be looking for a way out of this trap.

Prospects for liberty

That leads to the crucial question Higgs takes up at the end of the book. Is there any prospect for a return to limited government, one that maintains order but does not interfere with the liberty of people to peacefully live their lives? Ludwig von Mises argued that the interventionist state — the supposed “middle way” between capitalism and socialism — was inherently unstable and would ultimately embrace either socialism or laissez-faire capitalism in full. Although he greatly admires Mises, Higgs persuasively argues that on this question he was mistaken. Mises made the error of thinking that the bad economic results of interventionist policies (for example, minimum-wage laws) would eventually lead to the conclusion that they were failures. Thus, the interventionist agenda would be discredited and forced into retreat. Higgs counters that these policies actually succeed, since their goals are not economic efficiency but political power. He writes,

The all-too-numerous seemingly failed policies really fail to achieve only their *ostensible* objectives; but they succeed in achieving their *actual* objectives. In brief, the world of government affairs is the world of humbuggery; things are almost never what they are represented to be. All sides consider that they stand to gain by disguising their self-serving programs with a public-spirited rationale, and invariably they do so.

The success that politicians have in this regard — deceiving gullible voters so they can pay off the interest groups that support them — causes Higgs to conclude that there is no chance that the United States will adopt either of the polar opposites. Full socialism is utterly discredited, as nearly everyone now understands that it must mean widespread poverty. Without a considerable measure of capitalism, production falls and progress ceases. Politicians don't want to preside over that.

On the other hand, though, laissez faire is equally unattractive to politicians because most people don't want to accept responsibility for themselves. They want (or at least think they want) a government that protects them in innumerable ways: by promising them “adequate” retirement income, by guaranteeing “fair” prices and wages, by ensuring that everyone has health-care coverage, and so on. Politicians and their supporters manipulate the minds of people to get them to accept the premises of the welfare-warfare state. It starts early in government schools and continues on through adulthood, when people are bombarded with political messages on the good intentions and supposed accomplishments of their rulers.

For those reasons, the political pendulum swings in a rather narrow arc. If interventionism makes too big of a mess of things for most people, there will be a reaction and we'll enjoy a slight movement toward laissez faire, but it won't last. Before long the statist will regain the upper

hand by calling for more redistribution and more regulation, and many of the people will again take the bait. They'll vote for politicians who run the liberty-for-security scam.

Unless we libertarians can somehow found a new country and populate it with people who are not susceptible to the foolish belief that government can make life better, it seems that we're stuck with a very unsatisfactory status quo.

At the root of the problem is the fact that most people remain under the spell of politics. They can't see through the humbugery and in fact strongly support the government that so badly damages their interests. Most people think they're free and prosperous. They're unable to grasp that with a minimalist state they would have a great deal more freedom and prosperity. That is the problem we must deal with.

Neither Liberty Nor Safety is a powerful attack on the mindset that allows government to keep expanding. The only trouble is that it's a work of scholarship. Few Americans will read anything scholarly. If they'll read a book at all — and the dumbing down of Americans to the point where only a small percentage can and will read books must be accounted as one of the foremost “successes” of government education in its battle against independent thinking — it has to be easy. What I would dearly like Bob Higgs to do next is to take the core of his argument here and turn it into the sort of book that sells fast in airport bookstores.

George C. Leef is the director of the Pope Center for Higher Education Policy in Raleigh, North Carolina, and book review editor of [The Freeman](#).

This article was originally published in the September 2008 edition of *Freedom Daily*.