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Who Are You Calling Selfish?

by Mike Tennant

In an early episode of the television series *Bewitched*, Harold Harold (Paul Lynde), a highly nervous driving instructor, tries to teach Samantha Stephens (Elizabeth Montgomery) how to drive a car. At one point in the lesson he instructs her to go the wrong way in a traffic circle. Samantha, however, can read a sign and chooses to go the correct way, disregarding Harold's directions. He angrily demands that she stop and explain herself. This, of course, causes a traffic tie-up, and the drivers behind them begin honking their horns. As they depart the scene after about 30 seconds' argument, Harold leans out of the window and yells at the frustrated drivers behind them, "Selfish! Selfish!"

We laugh because we recognize the irony of the situation. Harold has been the selfish one, forcing his student to bring traffic to a standstill simply because she disobeyed his instructions — instructions that would have caused an accident had she obeyed them. Then he becomes outraged that other drivers are upset with his hogging the road and declares *them* selfish.

Out here in the real world, how many times have you heard that conservatives and libertarians are selfish because they believe that charity literally begins at home, not in the offices of some state bureaucracy? They are selfish, we are told, because they don't believe the government ought to take from those who have and give to those who don't have. They've "made it," and now they don't want to share with those less fortunate than they are. They're cruel, greedy misers who wear green eyeshades on their foreheads instead of bleeding hearts on their sleeves.

For some conservatives and libertarians, that may indeed be the case. For the vast majority, though, it's more likely that they see things as the angry drivers behind Harold did, namely as yet another instance of the old pot-and-kettle story, for two reasons.

First, the loudest advocates of government wealth-transfer programs are often the very wealthy: Think of John Kerry, Ted Kennedy, the Clintons, or any number of other prominent Democrats and Hollywood leftists. Those people really do have money to burn, yet rather than spend their own money on charitable endeavors — Al Gore's whopping \$353 of charitable giving

in 1997 comes to mind — they demand that everyone else give up their hard-earned money at gunpoint. Not only must they turn their money over to the government, but they must also watch as it is then delivered to those their “betters” deem deserving of it. Far be it from these selfless paragons of virtue to give their own money to the less fortunate! Let them steal it from others (legally, of course) and then pose for photographs, to great acclaim, as they present oversized checks to the poor unfortunates who would starve were it not for politicians’ generosity. Now just who is being selfish here?

It’s worth mentioning that, in fact, self-described conservatives give on average about 30 percent more to charity than do liberals — and that despite the fact that conservatives tend to make less money. It seems those who believe that charity is a matter for the private sector put their money where their mouths are, while those who believe that charity is a matter for the public sector put other people’s money where *their* mouths are.

Second, the people on the receiving end of government largesse have done nothing to earn it — they are, in fact, engaging in legalized theft — and, on top of that, never cease demanding an ever-increasing portion of the paychecks of those who earn them. The war on poverty has cost taxpayers \$10 trillion or more since 1964. Medicare, projected at its inception to cost \$12 billion in 1990, ended up costing \$107 billion that year, and its budget has ballooned even further since then (\$325 billion as of fiscal year 2006). Now we have President Bush’s prescription-drug benefit adding to the burden to the tune of tens of billions of dollars annually. Social Security cost taxpayers \$544 billion in FY 2006. Hillary Clinton tried once to foist single-payer health insurance on the entire country and has made it clear that she would have proceeded again toward that goal had she been elected president, albeit under a less blatantly socialistic guise; Barack Obama promises the same.

Again, who is being selfish: the people who simply want to be allowed to dispose of their own income as they see fit (including donating some of it to charity), or the people who, having sat back and lived off the hard work of others, continually clamor for more and more of others’ money and then whine that the taxpayers are the selfish ones?

As with Harold Harold, today's wealth redistributionists and their political constituencies make highly self-centered demands without regard to their effects on others whose very existence they barely tolerate. Then when those who suffer from their unwise decisions have the temerity to complain, and especially to complain about being forced to give up even more of their income, *they* are the ones branded as selfish! Getting the redistributionists to recognize their own selfishness, however, is a daunting task, for they consider themselves, to borrow from Thomas Sowell, the Anointed, and everyone else the Great Unwashed. It's enough to make you wish you could twitch your nose and make them all disappear.

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