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*Labor to keep alive in your heart that little spark
of celestial fire called conscience.*

— *George Washington*

FUTURE OF FREEDOM

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Understanding the JFK Assassination, Part 4

by Jacob G. Hornberger



In the November 1964 presidential election, Lyndon Johnson easily defeated his GOP opponent, Barry Goldwater. The month prior to the election, the commission that Johnson had appointed to investigate the assassination, which became known as the Warren Commission, issued its report concluding that President Kennedy had been shot by a lone gunman, a former U.S. Marine communist named Lee Harvey Oswald. The report received a wave of accolades from the mainstream press and the Washington establishment. Therefore, it wasn't surprising that the assassination never became an issue in the 1964 presidential campaign.

As people began reading and studying the Warren Report, how-

ever, doubts and questions began being raised. It began dawning on some people that everything just looked a bit too pat. Communist Marine kills president. Communist Marine himself is suddenly killed. Investigation into the possibility that others were involved is quickly shut down. Americans are told that there is nothing to look at and are exhorted to move on with their lives. Chief Justice of the United States Earl Warren, the chairman of the commission, announces that records of the U.S. national-security state agencies relating to the assassination will have to remain secret for a period of 75 years. When someone asks Warren whether Americans would ever be permitted to see the records, he responded, Yes but "not in your lifetime."

It wasn't long before a small group of people began challenging the official findings. One of them was a New York lawyer named Mark Lane, who began giving talks detailing contradictions, failings, mysteries, and anomalies in the Warren Commission's investigation, including its failure to interview many important witnesses. In 1966, Lane published a book entitled *Rush to Judgment*, which became a *New York Times* bestseller. He also produced a video with the

same title that featured important witnesses who had not been called before the Warren Commission and whose testimony was contrary to the official findings.

Before long a majority of Americans had come to reject the official findings of the Warren Report.

A man named Harold Weisburg was another critic. He was a former U.S. State Department intelligence analyst who had also served as a U.S. Senate staff member and investigative reporter. He began self-publishing books raising questions about the Warren Report and challenges to it.

Another 1966 book raising doubts about the Warren Report was *Inquest*, by Edward Jay Epstein. There was also the 1967 book *Six Seconds in Dallas*, by Josiah Thompson. Another was the 1967 book *Accessories after the Fact*, by Sylvia Meagher.

(An excellent book detailing the efforts of the “first generation of researchers” in the Kennedy assassination is *Praise from a Future Generation: The Assassination of John F. Kennedy and the First Generation of the Warren Report*, by John Kelin.)

Needless to say, these critics were not well-received by the main-

stream press and the Washington establishment, which had completely and unconditionally accepted and embraced the Warren Commission’s official findings. The critics were reviled and condemned for daring to challenge the official findings.

Nonetheless, before long a majority of Americans had come to doubt the official findings of the Warren Report. While there was still not a consensus into what exactly had happened, most people concluded that the Warren Report was not a truthful or accurate account of what did happen.

The 1968 election

One thing was becoming increasingly clear: Unlike the case in the 1964 presidential election, there was a growing likelihood that the assassination was going to become a campaign issue in the upcoming 1968 presidential campaign, especially after the press reported in February 1967 that the district attorney in New Orleans, Jim Garrison, was conducting an official criminal investigation into the assassination. Garrison was alleging that the assassination was actually a highly sophisticated regime-change operation and cover-up initiated by the U.S. national-security establishment.

Throughout his political career, Lyndon Johnson had displayed a determined drive to become president. When someone asked him why he was giving up the powerful post of senate majority leader to run for vice president as Kennedy's campaign mate, Johnson observed that he was willing to roll the dice, given the possibility that Kennedy could die in office, which would thereby automatically elevate Johnson to the presidency. After Johnson became president in November 1963, he clearly loved the power and adoration that came with the job.

Therefore, it was a virtual certainty that Johnson planned to run for reelection in 1968. But he had to realize the danger that the Kennedy assassination posed to his campaign.

After all, Johnson was the one who had launched the fraudulent autopsy scheme in the first place. Recall that when the team of Secret Service agents forced their way out of Parkland Hospital, screaming, yelling, issuing a stream of profanities, and brandishing their guns, they said that they were operating under orders.

They never said who had issued those orders, but it had to be Johnson. There is no other reasonable possibility. After all, think about what those Secret Service agents

were doing. They were violating the law. They were obstructing justice. They were implicitly threatening to kill hospital personnel who got in their way, including the Dallas County medical examiner, Dr. Earl Rose, who was simply doing his job by insisting on conducting the autopsy, as required by Texas law.

This was a straight murder case, one in which only Dallas County, where the murder took place, had jurisdiction.

Keep in mind that at that time, it was not a federal offense to kill a president. Therefore, this was a straight murder case, one in which only Dallas County, where the murder took place, had jurisdiction. That means that the Secret Service had no authority over the case. Neither did the FBI nor the Justice Department. And certainly the military had no jurisdiction over the matter. Only Dallas County officials, including Rose, had legal authority over the assassination.

What are the chances that a team of Secret Service agents would suddenly decide to obstruct justice by preventing state officials from doing the job that the law required them to do without receiving an order from the president? What are

the chances that a Secret Service team, without an order from the president, would implicitly threaten to employ deadly force against Rose and any other hospital personnel who got in their way?

**Johnson's objective was clear:
Get the body into the hands
of the military.**

Moreover, keep in mind that as soon as the Secret Service team went into action, Johnson began simultaneously heading to Dallas Love Field, where Air Force One and Air Force Two were parked. Immediately upon arriving, he had his personnel begin removing seats from the back of Air Force One to make room for Kennedy's casket. Johnson's actions constitute virtually conclusive circumstantial evidence that he was the one who issued the order to the Secret Service team. After all, removing the seats to make room for the casket would indicate that Johnson knew that the casket would soon be arriving. How else could he know that if he wasn't the one who issued the order?

Johnson always maintained that the real reason he delayed immediately getting into the air and returning to Washington was that he didn't

believe it would be proper to leave Mrs. Kennedy behind in Texas.

But if that was true, then why didn't he stay with her at Parkland Hospital and personally escort her back to the airport? Mrs. Kennedy was in the middle of the altercation between the Secret Service and Rose at Parkland. She was there when the agents began screaming, yelling, uttering profanities, and brandishing their guns. If gunshots had become necessary, she, like everyone else, obviously could have been the victim of a stray shot.

Why wasn't Mr. Chivalry, Lyndon Johnson, there at the hospital to protect her and escort her back to Love Field? The reason is that he had beelined it to the airport to begin removing seats from the back of the plane to make room for the casket, which he knew would be arriving shortly.

Military involvement

Once Johnson arrived at Andrews Air Force Base with the president's body, his objective was clear: Get the body into the hands of the military, which would then conduct the autopsy.

What is the possibility that Johnson would be unaware of the military's plans to conduct a fraudulent autopsy on the body of Presi-

dent Kennedy? No reasonable possibility whatsoever.

After all, an obvious question arises: When was the plan for the fraudulent autopsy conceived? Given that the plan was launched immediately upon Kennedy's death, which was about 1 p.m. in Dallas, the plan necessarily had to have been conceived before the president died.

When was the plan for the fraudulent autopsy conceived?

That in turn means that there are only two possibilities: Either Johnson and the military came up with the idea of a fraudulent autopsy in the 30-minute period between the time Kennedy was shot and then declared dead, or they came up with the idea prior to the assassination.

The "ace in the hole"

What are the chances that when Johnson arrived at Parkland Hospital, he spent the next 30 minutes or so thinking to himself, "I think I'll have the U.S. military conduct a fraudulent autopsy on Kennedy's body. This will require me to order a team of Secret Service agents to forcibly prevent the Dallas County Medical Examiner from conducting a legitimate autopsy and force their way

out of the hospital with the body and bring it to Love Field, where I can then transport it to Washington, where I will have the military conduct a fraudulent autopsy?"

There is no reasonable possibility that such a thing could have happened. After all, what would be the motive of coming up with such a far-fetched scheme immediately after the president was shot?

That, of course, leaves the other possibility as the reasonable one: Johnson and the military had to have conceived of the fraudulent autopsy plan prior to the assassination. It is the only possibility that makes any sense.

In the 1964 presidential campaign, the danger of the fraudulent autopsy's being exposed was virtually nonexistent. Not so, however, in the 1968 presidential campaign. With an increasing number of people challenging and doubting the official lone-gunman theory of the assassination, the danger that anyone would discover the existence of a fraudulent autopsy was increasing as well.

Mind you, in 1967 the fraudulent autopsy that the military had conducted on President Kennedy's body was still encased in secrecy concrete, with virtually no leaks having taken place. Recall that the

military had forced people who had participated in the autopsy to take secrecy oaths and had presented them with official letters of secrecy emphasizing the extreme need to maintain secrecy of matters relating to the autopsy. Military personnel were told that the autopsy was a highly classified operation and, therefore, that they could never reveal to anyone what they had seen. They were threatened with severe punishment, including court martial or criminal prosecution, if they ever talked. As one participant to the autopsy put it, they put the fear of God into everyone.

The military had forced people who had participated in the autopsy to take secrecy oaths.

In 1967, the secrecy surrounding the autopsy was still holding. But Johnson had to appreciate the dangers surrounding the autopsy, which I believe explain the three meetings at the National Archives in November 1966, January 1967, and February 1968. (For an excellent discussion of these three meetings, see “How Five Investigations into JFK’s Medical/Autopsy Got It Wrong,” by Gary L. Aguilar and Kathy Cunningham, an essay at history-matters.com.)

Johnson was obviously getting ready for the 1968 race. I submit that he was going to use those three meetings to deflect attention from questions that anyone might raise regarding the autopsy. If anyone did raise questions regarding the autopsy during the 1968 campaign, he could say, “That’s ridiculous. In late 1966, a meeting was held at the National Archives in which the autopsy radiologist, photographer, and two of the pathologists carefully reviewed the autopsy photographs and X-rays in the official record and certified in writing that the official inventory was true and correct. Then a couple of months later, the three autopsy pathologists met at the National Archives and conducted a careful review of the official photographs and X-rays and re-certified that their autopsy findings were true and correct in every respect. And then just recently, in February, a team of independent, renowned pathologists from different parts of the country, met at the National Archives, reviewed the autopsy photographs and X-rays, and confirmed the accuracy of the official autopsy report.”

It would have been a very effective campaign retort to anyone who raised questions or doubts about the autopsy. Indeed, what other rea-

sonable explanation would there be for the three meetings except as a campaign device for Johnson? If the military's autopsy was true and correct in the first place, why would the military and the Justice Department feel the need to have three separate meetings to confirm the legitimacy, truthfulness, and accuracy of the autopsy report? On the other hand, given that Johnson knew that he was at the center of the fraudulent autopsy scheme, it would have made perfect sense for him to begin preparing a defense against what might be hurled at him during the campaign.

It would have made perfect sense for Johnson to begin preparing a defense against what might be hurled at him during the campaign.

In fact, the third report — the Clark Panel report, the one consisting of the team of independent renowned pathologists — is the most intriguing of the three meetings. Issued in February 1968, the report was kept secret. Does such secrecy make any sense? If the purpose of the report was to answer the early critics of the Warren Report, then why not announce the results publicly to the world in order to respond to those critics?

One possible explanation for the secrecy, which I believe is the most logical, is that Johnson was planning to use the Clark Panel as his “ace in the hole” during his upcoming campaign for reelection. It would have been a reason for keeping it secret. It would also explain why the Justice Department had Commander Boswell send a letter requesting the Clark Panel: Johnson would have wanted to make sure that no one would think that the idea was coming from him. He could then spring the Clark Panel report on his GOP opponent or critics when the time was right during the 1968 campaign.

Moreover, the fact that the Clark Panel issued its report in February 1968 and then was kept secret is powerful circumstantial evidence that in early 1968 Johnson was still planning on running for reelection.

The following month, Wisconsin Sen. Eugene McCarthy, who had decided to run against Johnson for the Democratic nomination, stunned the political world by garnering 42 percent of the vote in the New Hampshire primary against Johnson's 49 percent. Several days later, New York Sen. Robert Kennedy, the brother of the deceased president, entered the race against Johnson. A couple of weeks later,

Johnson shocked the world by stating that he would not seek reelection and would instead use his remaining time in office to seek a peace settlement in the Vietnam War, which had come to consume his presidency.

In January 1969, Jim Garrison's criminal prosecution in New Orleans against a man named Clay Shaw, where Garrison was alleging that the Kennedy assassination was actually a highly sophisticated regime-change operation and cover-up, was set for trial.

In preparation for trial, Garrison filed an extraordinary proceeding in a Washington, D.C., court requesting that the National Archives be ordered to produce the official autopsy photographs and X-rays in New Orleans to be used in the trial.

The Justice Department vehemently objected and opposed Garrison's request, maintaining that the photographs and X-rays had to continue being kept secret.

On the evening before the hearing before the D.C. judge, the Justice Department pulled out what I contend was going to be Lyndon Johnson's "ace in the hole" had he continued his plans to run for reelection. The Department presented Garrison's team and the presid-

ing judge with the Clark Panel results, which up to that time had been kept secret. They were using the Clark Panel results to show the judge that the official autopsy was honest and genuine.

Unable to refute the findings of a team of independent, renowned pathologists who had carefully studied the autopsy photographs and X-rays and put its seal of approval on the official autopsy report, Garrison effectively threw in the towel and presented no witnesses at that hearing. On that day, the judge denied Garrison's request for the autopsy photographs and X-rays.

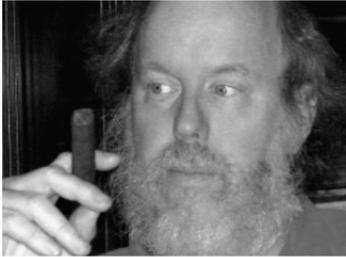
Johnson's "ace in the hole" had worked, albeit in a manner different from what he evidently planned. It's worth noting that the hearing on Garrison's motion took place on January 20, 1968, the day that Johnson left office.

Jacob Hornberger is founder and president of The Future of Freedom Foundation.

NEXT MONTH:
**"Understanding the JFK
Assassination, Part 5"**
by Jacob G. Hornberger

Truth Is an Outlaw in Washington

by James Bovard



“Truth isn’t truth,” declared Rudy Giuliani, Donald Trump’s personal attorney, on *Meet the Press* last August. Giuliani’s comment was the “Trump era’s epitaph,” according to a *Washington Post* columnist. But truth really is defined differently inside the Beltway — when it is not in total hiding.

Trump could face a “perjury trap” from Special Counsel Robert Mueller because of the unique way that the FBI defines reality — and the truth. The FBI rarely records interviews and instead relies on written summaries (known as Form 302s) which “are widely held up in court as credible evidence of conversations,” the *New York Times* noted last year. Though defense attorneys routinely debunk the accuracy and credibility of 302s, prose-

cutors continue touting FBI interview summaries as the voice of God. Even if Trump made factually correct comments to Mueller, he could still face legal peril if his statements failed to harmonize with FBI “trust me on what I heard” memos containing contrary assertions.

Trump’s danger is compounded because federal agents have the right to lie to you — and to put you in prison if you lie to them. Any citizen who makes even a single-word false utterance (“no,” “yes”) to a federal agent faces up to five years in prison and a \$250,000 fine. The federal false-statements law conveys so much power that, according to Solicitor General Seth Waxman, it could allow federal agents to “escalate completely innocent conduct into a felony.” One federal judge condemned the law for encouraging “inquisition as a method of criminal investigation.”

Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, dissenting from a 1998 Supreme Court decision upholding the law, concluded that the law may result in “government generation of a crime when the underlying suspected wrongdoing is or has become nonpunishable.”

Though other federal agencies cannot play the FBI’s game with 302 forms and the false-statements law,

they have plenty of options for editing the public record. Inside the Beltway, “plausible deniability” (a phrase first publicly used by CIA chief Allen Dulles in the 1950s) is “close enough for government work” to truth.

In 2017 persons who filed FOIA requests “received censored files or nothing ... 78 percent” of the time.

Congress enacted the Freedom of Information Act in 1966 to boost self-government by entitling Americans to learn what Washington did in their name. But FOIA is derided nowadays as a “Freedom from Information Act” that begets merely a mirage of transparency. In 2017 persons who filed FOIA requests “received censored files or nothing ... 78 percent” of the time, according to the Associated Press. Federal agencies with the most power — such as the FBI, Department of Homeland Security, and the Justice Department — are among the worst FOIA abusers. The State Department rejected more than a dozen FOIA requests for Hillary Clinton’s email when she served as Secretary of State — paving the way for clashes and leaks that roiled the 2016 election campaign.

Federal agencies also maximize their discretion in defining truth through almost 50 million decisions to classify information each year. The more information the government withholds, the easier it becomes to manipulate public opinion with whatever “facts” are released. By selectively disclosing only details that support the administration’s policies, government prevents citizens from fairly assessing the latest power grabs or interventions.

Power is truth

The more power government seizes, the more easily it can suppress the truth. The Justice Department can totally suppress embarrassing facts on the most contentious issues (such as torture or assassinations) by invoking the “state secrets” doctrine. The George W. Bush administration routinely invoked state secrets to seek “blanket dismissal of every case challenging the constitutionality of specific, ongoing government programs,” according to a study by the Constitution Project. The Bush administration used state-secrets claims to prohibit torture victims from disclosing to their defense attorneys the specific interrogation methods they suffered. A federal appeals

court slammed the Obama administration's use of state secrets: "According to the government's theory, the judiciary should effectively corral off all secret government actions from judicial scrutiny, immunizing the CIA and its partners from the demands and the limits of the law." Government's sway over damning information is boundless — at least until some whistleblower such as Edward Snowden obliterates federal credibility.

**Pervasive secrecy
ensures that Americans are
deceived far more than they
realize.**

Unfortunately, Americans have no legal way to commandeer government files until long after most power grabs are consummated. Pervasive secrecy ensures that Americans are deceived far more than they realize.

If one is seeking Shakespearian-level creativity, official claims regarding U.S. military and foreign policy rarely disappoint. How much has changed since 1965, when Pentagon Assistant Secretary Arthur Sylvester hectoring Vietnam War correspondents: "Look, if you think any American official is going to tell you the truth, then you're stupid.

Did you hear that? Stupid!" Sylvester's slap-down has not deterred the media from continuing to play stenographer for the vast majority of government assertions.

Politicians get away with lies in part because Americans are taught that anyone who disbelieves the government must be crazy — the same view the KGB took of Soviet dissidents in the 1970s. This prejudice was canonized in the work of former communist and Ivy League professor Richard Hofstadter's *Paranoid Style in American Politics*. Top-ranking government officials exploited that notion to help deceive Americans into submission. At the time of the Gulf of Tonkin incident, Defense Secretary Robert McNamara declared that it is "inconceivable that anyone even remotely familiar with our society and system of government could suspect the existence of a conspiracy" to take the nation to war on false pretenses. The later exposure of the Johnson administration's lies on the Gulf of Tonkin did not prevent McNamara from being appointed to the *Washington Post's* board of directors.

The lies of conniving politicians are compounded by kowtowing experts. In Washington, power is the highest truth. Credibility depends

on titles, not veracity. Blind deference to authority might be expected from semi-literate peasants in some mountain hollow. But it is more of a problem coming from the academic elite and establishment heavyweights. Leslie Gelb, former president of the Council for Foreign Relations, admitted, “My initial support for the [Iraq] war was symptomatic of unfortunate tendencies within the foreign-policy community, namely the disposition and incentives to support wars to retain political and professional credibility.” As Daniel Ellsberg declared in 1970, the Pentagon Papers provided thousands of pages documenting “twenty years of crime under four presidents. And every one of those presidents had a Harvard professor at his side, telling him how to do it and how to get away with it.”

Lies subvert democracy by crippling citizens’ ability to rein in government.

Washington’s hypocrisy on lying shined brightly when Congress passed the Stolen Valor Act of 2006, which made it a federal crime to falsely claim to have received a U.S. military award. The Bush administration made hundreds of false

claims regarding Iraq to justify its 2003 invasion. But the Justice Department sees no problem with that duplicity — unless someone wrongly claimed to have won a medal in a war launched on false pretenses. Retail lying was a crime, while wholesale lying was merely politics. (The Supreme Court in 2012 struck down the law as a violation of freedom of speech.)

Public lies, private doubts

Lies subvert democracy by crippling citizens’ ability to rein in government. Citizens are left clueless about perils until it is too late for the nation to pull back. As Hannah Arendt noted, during the Vietnam War “the policy of lying was hardly ever aimed at the enemy but chiefly if not exclusively destined for domestic consumption, for propaganda at home and especially for the purpose of deceiving Congress.” CIA analysts did excellent work in the early period of the Vietnam conflict. But “in the contest between public statements, always overoptimistic, and the truthful reports of the intelligence community, persistently bleak and ominous, the public statements were likely to win simply because they were public,” she observed.

And bigger lies

Arendt noted in 1971 that “lies have always been regarded as justifiable tools in political dealings.... [We] can only be surprised how little attention has been paid, in our tradition of philosophical and political thought, to their significance.” Political lies are far more dangerous than most political scientists recognize. Big government requires Big Lies — and not just about wars but across the board. The more powerful centralized administration becomes the more abuses it commits and the more lies it must tell. The government becomes addicted to the growth of its own revenue and power — and this growth cannot be maintained without denying or suppressing the adverse effects of Leviathan’s growth.

Ironically, despite the government’s long record of deceptions, distrust of government is often portrayed as more dangerous than government power itself. Private doubts are supposedly a greater threat to America than official lies. Trust in government becomes mass Prozac, keeping people docile and compliant.

Perhaps the biggest myth remaining — at least in high-school civics classes — is that presidents are somehow more honest than

other politicians. Calvin Coolidge may have been the last man who appeared more honest at the end of his presidency than at the start. After Americans were appalled at Richard Nixon’s Watergate duplicities, Jimmy Carter captured the presidency in 1976 in part by promising never to lie to the public. But that pledge did not prevent President Carter from falsely proclaiming that the shah of Iran was a progressive, enlightened ruler — a tall tale that exploded and helped end Carter’s presidency. Campaigning against Carter in 1980, Republican candidate Ronald Reagan would recite Carter’s “never lie” pledge and add, “That reminds me of the quote from Ralph Waldo Emerson: ‘The louder he talked of his honor, the faster we counted our spoons.’” Unfortunately, presidential lies are routinely treated as harmless errors, regardless of how many deaths they cause.

Distrust of government is often portrayed as more dangerous than government power itself.

While every president in living memory has shredded his own credibility, Trump is reported to be shattering the bogus benchmark (the *Washington Post* asserts he has

made more than 2,000 false or misleading claims). But wild-eyed tweeting is not a federal offense, and it is unclear whether the president has said anything specifically that places him in legal peril.

Perhaps the biggest whopper in Washington nowadays is the assumption that the government and the political class will automatically be trustworthy once the Trump era ends. Even if Trump is toppled by impeachment, there will still be a thousand precedents for federal cover-ups and duplicity. And neither political party nor the bureaucracy has shown any itch to cease hornswoggling the American people.

James Bovard is a policy advisor to The Future of Freedom Foundation and is the author of a new ebook, Freedom Frauds: Hard Lessons in American Liberty, published by FFF, Public Policy Hooligan, Attention Deficit Democracy, and eight other books

NEXT MONTH:
“Washington’s Biggest Fairy Tale: ‘Truth Will Out.’”
by James Bovard

I am more and more convinced that Man is a dangerous creature, and that power whether vested in many or a few is ever grasping, and like the grave cries give, give.

— *Abigail Adams*

Your Tax Dollars at Work

by *Laurence M. Vance*



We have all seen the signs. They might be referring to a road-widening project, a new city or county park, sidewalks being repaired, new airport terminals being constructed, potholes being filled in, additional trees being planted, or some sort of downtown development. But regardless of the project, the signs are usually the same: Your Tax Dollars at Work.

Now, it is true that most improvement ventures are state, county, or city projects. But it should be remembered that many of them are still funded in whole or in part by the federal government. Nevertheless, because the spending of tax dollars by the federal government is so much greater than that state, county, or city governments, it is

the federal government that we are most concerned about.

According to the year-end data from the September 2018 Monthly Treasury Statement of Receipts and Outlays of the U.S. Government — as reported by U.S. Treasury Secretary Steven T. Mnuchin and Office of Management and Budget (OMB) Director Mick Mulvaney in a joint press release — total spending by the federal government in fiscal year 2018 (which ended on Sept. 30, 2018) was a staggering \$4.107 trillion. The federal government spends about \$11.232 billion per day, \$468 million per hour, \$7.8 million per minute, or \$130,000 per second. That means that in one week, the federal government spends more than the governments of Connecticut, Kansas, New Mexico, and North Carolina spend in a year — combined. It means that federal spending in one day is higher than each of the yearly budgets of the governments of Alaska, Delaware, Idaho, Iowa, Maine, Mississippi, Nebraska, Oklahoma, Rhode Island, South Dakota, Vermont, West Virginia, and Wyoming.

Although the total outlays of the federal government were \$4.107 trillion in fiscal year 2018, its receipts were “only” \$3.328 trillion. That means that the federal budget

deficit for fiscal year 2018 was \$779 billion. The only way that the federal government was able to spend more than it took in was by borrowing the \$779 billion. Deficit spending by the federal government is the norm, and has reached the \$1 trillion mark a few times since the turn of the century. That is why the national debt (the total of each year's deficit since the country was founded) is now more than \$21 trillion.

Before looking at how the federal government puts Americans' tax dollars to work, let's look at where and how the government gets all of its money in the first place.

Government receipts

Government receipts come primarily from the collection of taxes. Of the \$3.328 trillion that the federal government took in during fiscal year 2018, miscellaneous receipts (various fees, penalties, forfeitures, and fines) were only \$110.5 billion.

Estate and gift taxes were \$23.0 billion. They are imposed by the federal government on the transfer of property from one person to another, either at death (estate tax) or while the giver of the property is living (gift tax). The estate tax rate is 40 percent of the value of the estate exceeding \$11.18 million. The gift

tax, which is related to the estate tax, kicks in when you give someone — in cash, property, or assets — more than \$15,000 in a year. However, the amount of the gift simply counts against your \$11.18 million lifetime exclusion.

Deficit spending by the federal government is the norm.

Customs duties were \$41.3 billion. The Harmonized Tariff Schedule of the United States, published by the U.S. International Trade Commission, lists the thousands of imports subject to tariffs and the tariff rate.

Excise taxes were \$95.0 billion. The largest excise tax is on fuel: 18.4¢ per gallon on gasoline and 24.4¢ cents per gallon on diesel fuel. Other excise taxes include the taxes on passenger air fares, air cargo, and aviation fuel; the taxes resulting from the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (the ACA or Obamacare), such as the taxes imposed on health insurers, importers and manufacturers of prescription drugs, medical devices, and indoor tanning services; and the taxes on tobacco and alcohol.

Corporate income taxes were \$204.7 billion. Because of the passage of the Tax Cuts and Jobs Act of

2017 (the Trump tax cuts), beginning on January 1, 2018, the corporate tax rate was lowered to a flat 21 percent. Previous to that, the maximum corporate tax rate was 35 percent — one of the highest corporate tax rates in the world.

Social insurance and retirement receipts were \$1,170.7 billion. Payroll taxes consist of Social Security and Medicare taxes. The Social Security tax rate is 12.4 percent (split equally between employer and employee) on the first \$128,400 of employee income. The Medicare tax rate is 2.9 percent (split equally between employer and employee) on every dollar of employee income. “The rich” also pay a 0.9 percent Additional Medicare Tax on income exceeding \$200,000 (\$250,000 married filing jointly).

Individual income taxes were \$1,683.5 billion. Under the Tax Cuts and Jobs Act, there are seven tax rates and corresponding income brackets:

Single

10%	—	\$0–\$9,525
12%	—	\$9,525–\$38,700
22%	—	\$38,700–\$82,500
24%	—	\$82,500–\$157,500
32%	—	\$157,500–\$200,000
35%	—	\$200,000–\$500,000
37%	—	\$500,000+

Married filing jointly

10%	—	\$0–\$19,050
12%	—	\$19,050–\$77,400
22%	—	\$77,400–\$165,000
24%	—	\$165,000–\$315,000
32%	—	\$315,000–\$400,000
35%	—	\$400,000–\$600,000
37%	—	\$600,000+

In addition, some Americans have to pay capital gains taxes on their income from investments. And then there is the Net Investment Income Tax at a rate of 3.8 percent on investment income exceeding \$200,000 (\$250,000 married filing jointly). According to data on consumer expenditures released by the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), Americans on average spend more annually on taxes than on food and clothing combined, with most of their taxes being income taxes and Social Security taxes.

Government outlays

As mentioned previously, total outlays of the federal government in fiscal year 2018 were \$4.107 trillion. Here is a brief summary of how Americans’ tax dollars were put to work:

The federal government contains a myriad of agencies, bureaus, corporations, commissions, admin-

istrations, authorities, and boards organized under fifteen departments. These departments (and their spending in billions of dollars for fiscal year 2018) are: Agriculture (136.7), which includes the food stamp program; Commerce (8.5); Defense (600.7); Education (63.7); Energy (26.4); Health and Human Services (1,120.5), which includes Medicare, Medicaid, and a myriad of other welfare programs; Homeland Security (68.3), which includes the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and the Transportation Security Administration (TSA); Housing and Urban Development (54.6); Interior (13.2); Justice (34.5), which includes the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA); Labor (39.6); State (26.3), which includes funding for the United Nations; Transportation (78.4); Treasury (629.4), which paid \$521.5 billion in interest on the national debt; and Veterans Affairs (178.5).

The biggest-spending independent federal agency is the Social Security Administration.

And then there is the alphabet soup of independent agencies of the federal government, each of which has its own budget. They include the SBA, USPS, NASA, CPSC,

CFTC, CIA, NSF, FCC, FTC, NEA, NEH, NSA, EPA, and USAID. The biggest-spending independent federal agency is the Social Security Administration (SSA), which spent \$1.039 trillion in fiscal year 2018.

There are two kinds of spending by the federal government: mandatory and discretionary. Mandatory spending refers to the portion of the budget that Congress legislates outside of the annual appropriations process. It accounts for about two-thirds of the federal budget. It includes spending on Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid, welfare and subsidies, food stamps, unemployment benefits, refundable tax credits, and veterans' benefits. Discretionary spending refers to the portion of the budget that is decided by Congress through the annual appropriations process each year. It accounts for about one-third of the federal budget. Aside from military spending, which dwarfs all the rest, it includes spending on education, NASA, foreign aid, job training, Head Start, veterans' benefits, scientific research grants, and the Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) program.

What the government doesn't reveal in its reports and press releases is some of the outrageous things it spends its money on. For

that we are indebted to publications such as *Waste Watch*, issued annually by Oklahoma congressman Steve Russell; *Wastebook*, formerly issued annually by Sen. Jeff Flake; the *Congressional Pig Book*, the annual compilation of the pork-barrel projects in the federal budget by Citizens for Government Waste, and investigative reporting by journalists such as John Stossel and James Bovard. Here are some examples:

The government doesn't reveal in its reports and press releases some of the outrageous things it spends its money on.

The Department of Agriculture and the National Institutes of Health spent more than \$3.5 million on Hip-Hop to Health, a nutrition and physical activity obesity-prevention program that uses hip-hop songs to help obese preschoolers lose weight with music. The State Department gave \$17 million to the Asia Foundation, which is “committed to improving lives across a dynamic and developing Asia.” Two robots purchased by the Department of Veterans Affairs for the Madison VA Medical Center in Wisconsin for \$313,000 that went unused for two years were sold back to the manu-

facturer for less than \$2,000. Three National Institutes of Health grants totaling more than \$3.5 million were given to researchers at West Virginia University to find the root cause for people’s fear and anxiety about going to the dentist. The University of California-San Diego Scripps Institution of Oceanography received a \$560,000 grant from the National Science Foundation to study the endurance of mudskipper fish on a treadmill.

The nature of government spending

Aside from its sheer magnitude, it is the nature of government spending that is a problem all its own. The overwhelming majority of federal agencies are neither constitutional nor the proper role of government. Take, for example, the federal government’s National Railroad Passenger Corporation (Amtrak). Since its creation in 1971, it has cost taxpayers more than \$40 billion because it has continuously failed to make a profit. An audit last year by Ernst and Young found that Amtrak “has a history of operating losses and is dependent upon substantial Federal Government subsidies to sustain its operations and maintain its underlying infrastructure.” Yet the Constitution nowhere grants authority to the federal gov-

ernment to subsidize, let alone operate, a transportation system. And doing either one is contrary to the only legitimate functions of government in a free society: defense, judicial, and policing activities.

Most of what the Department of Defense does is offense, not defense.

But it's not just federal agencies: whole departments of the federal government are illegitimate; for example, the departments of Agriculture, Education, Energy, Health and Human Services, Housing and Urban Development, and Labor. Nowhere in the Constitution is the federal government authorized to have anything to do with agriculture, food, education, energy, health, housing, urban development, or employment. In fact, spending by those departments is so illegitimate that the entire departments should be shut down, their assets sold to the highest bidder, and every last one of their bureaucrats laid off.

Even the spending of legitimate departments of the federal government is suspect. The Department of Defense (DoD) is, obviously, intended to “provide for the common defense” of the country. Who could argue with that? But most of what

the DoD does is offense, not defense. The DoD fights unnecessary foreign wars and maintains an empire of troops and bases around the world. And those are not recent developments. The United States has been sending its soldiers all over the world for more than a hundred years. According to data from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, the United States spends more on defense than China, Russia, the United Kingdom, France, Japan, Saudi Arabia, and India combined. The DoD's budget could be cut drastically and it wouldn't affect the real defense of the United States one bit.

The worst thing about federal spending was recently pointed out by economist Walter Williams of George Mason University:

Tragically, two-thirds to three-quarters of the federal budget can be described as Congress taking the rightful earnings of one American to give to another American — using one American to serve another. Such acts include farm subsidies, business bailouts, Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid, food stamps, welfare, and many other programs.

And of course, all that spending is first filtered through the hands of government bureaucrats.

Libertarianism and taxes

Contrary to liberals and conservatives — who are fine with government spending as long as it is funding their agendas and who have no philosophical objection to taxes — libertarians have usually maintained on principle that taxation is theft. The libertarian view of taxes is not that taxes should be fair, adequate, sufficient, constitutional, uniform, flat, simple, efficient, apportioned equally, or low. The usual libertarian view of taxes is simply that they should not exist in the first place. Taxation is theft because it violates the nonaggression principle. As explained by the Austrian economist Murray Rothbard in *The Ethics of Liberty* (1982),

All other persons and groups in society (except for acknowledged and sporadic criminals such as thieves and bank robbers) obtain their income voluntarily: either by selling goods and services to the consuming public, or by voluntary gift (e.g., membership in a club or association, bequest, or inheritance). Only the State ob-

tains its revenue by coercion, by threatening dire penalties should the income not be forthcoming. That coercion is known as “taxation,” although in less regularized epochs it was often known as “tribute.” Taxation is theft, purely and simply, even though it is theft on a grand and colossal scale which no acknowledged criminals could hope to match. It is a compulsory seizure of the property of the State’s inhabitants, or subjects.

It would be an instructive exercise for the skeptical reader to try to frame a definition of taxation which does not also include theft. Like the robber, the State demands money at the equivalent of gunpoint; if the taxpayer refuses to pay, his assets are seized by force, and if he should resist such depredation, he will be arrested or shot if he should continue to resist.

The usual libertarian view of taxes is simply that they should not exist.

The income tax is especially egregious. As Frank Chodorov explained in his book *The Income Tax*:

Root of All Evil (1954), the income tax means that the state says to its citizens, “Your earnings are not exclusively your own; we have a claim on them, and our claim precedes yours; we will allow you to keep some of it, because we recognize your need, not your right; but whatever we grant you for yourself is for us to decide.” So, if taxation is theft, why do libertarians pay taxes? Libertarians pay taxes for the same reason that they hand over their wallet to someone who points a gun in their face and says, “Give me your money or I will shoot you.” They do not pay taxes because, as the inscription engraved on the exterior of the IRS Building in Washington, D.C., reads, “Taxes are what we pay for a civilized society.”

Conclusion

One of the main objections of liberals and conservatives to the libertarian view that taxes are government theft is that without income and payroll taxes the federal government could not function because it would not get the revenue it needs. But since the vast majority of spending by the federal government, as explained above, is on wealth-redistribution schemes, income-transfer programs, pay and benefits for government bureaucrats, war and mili-

tarism, and assorted boondoggles, federal spending could probably be cut 95 percent and the constitutional functions of government could still be adequately funded.

Libertarians pay taxes for the same reason that they hand over their wallet to someone who points a gun in their face.

In a libertarian society, that is, in a free society, the federal government wouldn't tax the incomes of individuals or businesses. In fact, the federal government wouldn't even know the incomes of individuals or the profits of business (unless they were public corporations). In a free society, all Americans would be entitled to keep all of the fruits of their labor and spend, save, invest, or donate their money as they see fit. The federal government wouldn't give out any grants, send any foreign aid or disaster relief, subsidize anything, supply welfare, distribute food, regulate anything, undertake job training, perform any research or exploration, fight poverty, provide student loans, operate a retirement system, or fund arts and culture. And the federal government certainly wouldn't take money out of the paychecks, pockets, and purses of some Americans

and redistribute it to other Americans after funneling it through multiple layers of an expansive bureaucracy. In a free society, U.S. troops would not fight foreign wars; be stationed on overseas bases; or bomb, maim, invade, occupy, or intervene in other countries.

Americans give millions of dollars every year to the federal government in donations or bequests.

The only reason it appears that the federal government “needs” the money it currently collects in taxes is that we have a massive welfare/warfare/regulatory state. But the actual constitutional functions of the federal government could be funded by tariffs, lotteries, donations, user fees, and land sales.

The federal government was funded primarily by tariffs before the income tax was instituted. Yes, tariffs are taxes on imports, but if they are low and for revenue and not for protection, they are much preferable to income and payroll taxes.

Every state except Alabama, Alaska, Hawaii, Nevada, and Utah has a lottery. Although the Constitution doesn’t authorize the federal government to have a lottery, the lack of constitutional authorization

has never prevented the government from doing anything. But to satisfy purists, the Constitution could easily be amended to allow for a national lottery. Because the odds of winning the lottery are so low, playing the lottery can almost be considered paying a “voluntary tax.”

According to 31 U.S.C. §9701, federal agencies are permitted to “charge for a service or thing of value provided by the agency.”

Even though Americans are obligated to pay taxes, they still give millions of dollars every year to the federal government in donations or bequests to reduce the federal debt held by the public. According to the Department of the Treasury’s Bureau of the Fiscal Service, Americans gave to the federal government \$2.6 million in fiscal year 2017, \$5.1 million in fiscal year 2014, and a whopping \$7.7 million in 2012. Just imagine how much Americans might donate if they were freed from their income and payroll tax burden.

The federal government currently owns roughly one-third of all land in the United States, including more than 80 percent of Alaska and Nevada, and more than half the land in Idaho, Oregon, and Utah. That land could and should be sold.

Federal tax dollars should never be put to work.

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NEXT MONTH:
“Equal Employment
Opportunity Is Bad Law”
by Laurence M. Vance

If the representatives of the people betray their constituents, there is then no recourse left but in the exertion of that original right of self-defense which is paramount to all positive forms of government, and which against the usurpations of the national rulers may be exerted with infinitely better prospect of success than against those of the rulers of an individual State. In a single State, if the persons entrusted with supreme power become usurpers, the different parcels, subdivisions, or districts of which it consists, having no distinct government in each, can take no regular measures for defense. The citizens must rush tumultuously to arms, without concert, without system, without resource; except in their courage and despair.

— Alexander Hamilton

Liberal Internationalism: True and False, Part 2

by *Richard M. Ebeling*



The classical liberal international order of the nineteenth century was not planned or designed by anyone. It was, for the most part, the natural outgrowth of the expanding influence of a new political philosophy of freedom, free markets, and free trade. It began to emerge in the wake of the twenty-five years of war that Britain and other European countries had been fighting against France until the final defeat of Napoleon in 1815.

During those decades of war, the ideas that came to be identified with classical liberalism — individual liberty, secure and respected private property rights under impartial rule of law, the recognized right of individuals to freely follow occupations of their own choosing

and to voluntarily trade with others on mutually agreed-upon terms, and wide respect for civil liberties — had been slowly growing in influence in both intellectual and political circles, especially in Great Britain.

The United States had been founded on those ideas following its independence from the British in 1783 and then recognized to a great (though imperfect) extent in the Constitution of 1787. Here was heralded a new philosophy of man, society, and government. One in which the individual was center stage with certain “inalienable rights” and in which was a far more limited government than had ever been experienced anywhere else in the world.

The ideal of free trade at the center of liberal internationalism

In Great Britain the advancement of classical liberalism included the case for unrestricted freedom of trade and enterprise among the people of the world. It culminated in the unilateral abolition in June 1846 of the agricultural protectionist trade barriers known in Britain as the Corn Laws. In the immediate years after 1846 this radical change to freedom of trade in food was accompanied by the repeal or

reduction of all other trade barriers to free trading in industrial and manufacturing goods in Great Britain and the reduction of import taxes to serve as modest government revenue sources.

Furthermore, the British free traders argued that they had no wish to force their free-trade beliefs on others. They hoped that other nations would see the benefits from a world without trade barriers, but they left that up to the domestic decisions of the citizens of other countries and their governments. Whether or not other nations followed the free-trade path, Great Britain would.

While far from eliminating and abolishing domestic and foreign barriers to human association and exchange to the same degree as the British and the Americans, many of the other nations of Europe followed suit in eliminating or reducing most of their trade impediments, guided by that classical liberal ideal.

The depoliticizing of human relationships for the liberal order

For most of the middle decades of the nineteenth century the guiding principle that directed much of public policy in practically all of the countries of the civilized world was

the depoliticizing of social and economic life. The mercantilist system of government control and command was removed and in its place arose the private sector of voluntary associations in civil society and the economics of free markets.

As the nineteenth century progressed, men, money, and material goods traveled increasingly freely.

As the nineteenth century progressed, men, money, and material goods traveled increasingly freely from one corner of the globe to another, with few political restrictions standing in the way, and most certainly in comparison with the eighteenth century. In addition, the freedom of exchange included worldwide sharing of knowledge about the arts and sciences. The world was becoming a global community of people who were increasingly freer and materially better-off.

Yes, there were international governmental agreements, including international river commissions, railway and transportation agreements, telegraph and postal unions, health rules and guidelines, procedures for uniform weights and measures, and respect for patents and copyrights. Individual

governments might also occasionally still try to influence the direction and form of domestic production and trade. Moreover, diplomatic intrigues and alliances still threatened the peace among nations.

Liberal ideas created international order, not global government.

But there was no League of Nations and no United Nations as part of some grand political design to police and manage international aspects of human life. There was no International Monetary Fund or World Bank or World Trade Organization. The major Western countries each, at some point, formalized their domestic monetary systems on the gold standard, with the result that each followed the “rules” of the gold standard and thus generated a global monetary order without governments’ gathering together to create it. And they followed fiscal policies that, in comparison with our own times, greatly limited government taxing and spending.

There also were attempts to establish some international rules concerning acceptable methods and forms of warfare, and the humane treatment of prisoners of war and civilian populations in war-time-occupied territories. At least among the European powers dur-

ing the nineteenth century, wars were less frequent, shorter in duration, and less destructive to person and property than in other times. To a great extent it was because the classical liberal ideal of respect for and minimal intrusion into the lives and property of private persons had influenced the thinking and policies of those governments, even if not to the same extent as among the British and the Americans.

The major Western countries each, at some point, formalized their domestic monetary systems on the gold standard.

However loosely, inconsistently, and incompletely, the attitudes and policies of all the major Western countries were guided by the classical-liberal spirit of the age. The world was not a classical-liberal heaven. Governments did things and private individuals acted in ways that were often far from the notion of a full respect and regard for the rightful liberty of all others. But it came closer to that ideal than had ever been practiced in any earlier time.

This liberal international order emerged and took on its specific forms of itself, again however im-

perfectly and inconsistently, as one nation after another became more liberal in its domestic affairs; this was reflected in government policies and practices, sometimes unilaterally and sometimes through agreements with other nations that also had been moving in similar liberal directions.

Collectivism and Neo-Liberalism replaced classical liberalism.

This world was shattered by the two world wars, followed by the counterrevolutions of collectivism in their various forms of socialism and communism, fascism, National Socialism (Nazism), and the interventionist-welfare state. Personal freedoms were reduced or extinguished; private-property rights and freedom of exchange were abolished or heavily straitjacketed; international free trade was replaced with trade barriers, restrictions, and prohibitions on the movement of money, goods, and people. Once again, people were made the property of the State to one degree or another. And two destructive world wars were endured, the likes of which had not been experienced before in modern history; tens of millions of people were killed by collectivist regimes or in the wars that collectivism set loose on the world.

So when the Second World War came to an end in 1945, the victorious powers, most especially the United States and its Western allies such as Great Britain and France, were determined to try to escape from the totalitarian madhouse of the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s.

It was “Neo-Liberalism” that had captured the imagination of “progressive” thinkers.

But the guiding ideas were not the classical liberalism of that earlier pre-World War I era. It was “Neo-Liberalism” that had captured the imagination of progressive thinkers, already before 1914, but which gained adherents and dominance during the 1930s and 1940s in the Western democracies. This was a liberalism that believed that a free society of civil liberties could be maintained, even while government took paternalistic responsibility for economic decision-making through democratic socialism or the interventionist-welfare state.

The re-politicizing of domestic and international relationships

Markets needed to be harnessed from unjust and uncontrolled laissez-faire through government controls and regulations, income redis-

tributions and social (i.e., compulsory) safety nets of planned pensions, health care, housing, employment and product regulations, and activist monetary and fiscal policies inspired by the new Keynesian economics.

International trade was not to be fully market-based and mostly free, as it had been in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, especially under British inspiration. Instead, it would be managed trade among the nations of the world, in which governments negotiated and determined what goods and services might be sold among countries, in what quantities and qualities, and at what tariff-influenced prices.

It is certainly true that many of these international trade agreements among governments significantly reduced the barriers to international trade and investment compared with the economic walls that nations had attempted to build around themselves in the 1930s. But it was not free trade, if that is understood as unrestricted trade in the importing and exporting of goods and services between nations of the world based on private consumer and producer decision-making.

In the heyday of classical liberalism, democratically elected government was considered the com-

plement to free markets, with citizens' choosing those who should hold political office for a period of time. But democracy was not considered the essence of a free society. That core was the freedom of individuals to peacefully live their lives as they chose, without the intervention and tyranny of kings or democratic majorities.

Democratically elected government was considered the complement to free markets.

But in the new world of the interventionist-welfare state, democracy became the center of political life, because it was through the political process that special-interest groups vied for privileges and favors at the expense of others, and where those holding or wanting political office could offer other people's money in exchange for campaign contributions and votes on election day.

The seeming crisis of democracy and the failure of the liberal international order that has brought about these reactionary alternatives of renewed protectionism, economic nationalism, populist politics, and the appeal of authoritarian leaders in various countries is not a crisis or failure of liberalism, if un-

derstood in the classical sense that we discussed earlier.

Only classical-liberal internationalism ensures freedom and peace.

Classical liberalism was abandoned, unfortunately, long ago. This crisis is that of Neo-Liberalism, the progressive liberalism of interventionism and welfare statism, the corrupt social liberalism of political power in the hands of domestic and international politicians and bureaucrats using government authority to advance their own social-engineering ends and serving the ideological and wealth-seeking special-interest groups who want control and income at the expense of others.

It is the classical-liberal internationalism that gave men freedom.

But the replacements offered for the prevailing system of Neo-Liberal interventionism are all merely variations on the same statist and collectivist theme. They couch themselves in nationalist or religious rhetoric, but they all offer nothing more than more of the same fundamental institutional system: political paternalism, economic privilege, and social tyranny, with just different power-holding elites

managing and manipulating the people wanting an end to the existing politicized Neo-Liberal domestic and liberal international order.

And China lurks in the wings, waiting to take its place as the master of the world in place of a declining America, with its own nationalist and socialist vision of the authoritarian state in which the individual is subservient to those in political control. China's rationalizing appeal to existing and would-be dictators and tyrants around the globe should not be underrated: It is an authoritarian democracy that is offered in place of the corrupt and dysfunctional Neo-Liberal democracy existing in numerous countries.

There is only one answer if liberty, prosperity, and world peace are to be truly restored and maintained. It is a renewal and revival of the classical-liberal internationalism that gave men freedom, began to end human poverty, and established the foundation for global world tranquility by separating the personal and economic affairs of humanity from the grasping and violent hands of government. Any other path will only mean a repetition of the past: power-lusting, special-privilege, tyrannizing social engineers, and international tensions that will threaten new and

highly destructive conflicts within and between nations.

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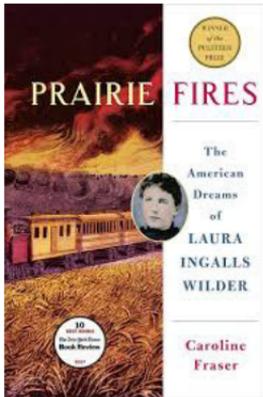
Some years ago I gave my expression to my own feeling — anti-patriotic feeling, it will doubtless be called — in a somewhat startling way. It was at the time of the second Afghan war, when, in pursuance of what were thought to be “our interests,” we were invading Afghanistan. News had come that some of our troops were in danger. At the Athenæum Club a well-known military man — then a captain but now a general — drew my attention to a telegram containing this news, and read it to me in a manner implying the belief that I should share his anxiety. I astounded him by replying — “When men hire themselves out to shoot other men to order, asking nothing about the justice of their cause, I don’t care if they are shot themselves.”

— Herbert Spencer

The Little House on the Prairie of Laura Ingalls Wilder

by Wendy McElroy

Prairie Fires: The American Dreams of Laura Ingalls Wilder by Caroline Fraser (Metropolitan Books, 2017); 625 pages.



P*rairie Fires: The American Dreams of Laura Ingalls Wilder*, by Caroline Fraser, is one of the finest biographies I have read, and a fully deserving winner of the 2018 Pulitzer Prize for Biography. *Prairie Fires* is the definitive depiction of Laura Ingalls Wilder (1867–1957), author of the world-renowned series of eight children’s books that are collectively known as *The Little House on the*

Prairie. The best-selling novels recount Wilder’s childhood and her family’s life on the Western frontier during the 1870s and 1880s. In simple but compelling prose, Wilder invites readers to become part of a loving family who survive through poverty, hunger, blizzards, droughts, locusts, crop-killing hailstorms, and other hardships that are almost unimaginable to modern readers. But the novels are far from depressing; they are inspiring. Wilder makes the past come alive and readers experience the heroism of perseverance, the strength of family bonds, and the sheer beauty of nature, as seen through young Laura’s eyes and Wilder’s simple eloquence.

Fraser captures it all.

The need for *Prairie Fires*

Wilder’s ability to evoke vivid images and feelings is part of why Fraser’s book is necessary. Millions of people around the world grew up with Wilder. They know her almost as a friend, because her novels draw them into her life vicariously. They believe the stories are accurate depictions of her childhood. Wilder encouraged this belief by repeatedly stating that the books contained unvarnished truth. The claim itself is untrue. The broad framework of her works is undoubtedly an accu-

rate portrayal of her past, and the sincerity of her style cannot be manufactured. But some incidents depicted did not occur, while others were materially altered, omitted, or romanticized. The blurring of Wilder's real childhood was accelerated by the extremely popular television show *Little House on the Prairie*, which ran from 1974 to 1982 and introduced a generation to an almost entirely false vision of Laura, her family, and pioneer life.

Wilder's descriptions were so vivid that the book became extremely popular with children.

Fraser does a great service by introducing the genuine Wilder to the world. The encyclopedic profile runs 625 pages, each one of which shows exhaustive research. Because much of the material comes from personal papers, such as a diary and letters, the massive biography is also a page-turner. As the editor of the Library of America edition of the Little House books, Fraser is uniquely qualified to interweave Wilder the writer with Wilder the woman into a seamless web. (Note: the referenced edition contains nine novels. The last one is *The First Four Years*, which was published after Wilder's death. It is a point of controversy

whether it belongs in the series, partly because she disliked it.)

Accessing the genuine Wilder is particularly important because she is thoroughly identified as an American icon, with the Little House books both reflecting America's early identity and helping to define it. Certainly, the U.S. State Department thought so. After World War II, it ordered Wilder's work to be translated into Japanese. In 1949, during the occupation of Japan, Gen. Douglas MacArthur's headquarters chose the sixth book in the series (*The Long Winter*) to be among the first American works to be translated and distributed widely. The purpose was to introduce Japanese children to American values, including democratization. Wilder's descriptions were so vivid that the book became extremely popular with children who knew nothing about the frontier West. Two other books in the series were subsequently translated, and a similar program was launched in Germany.

Does Fraser's book destroy the image of Wilder as the epitome of the American pioneer and values? Oddly enough, it doesn't. *Prairie Fires* presents the wrenching poverty and suffering endured by so many settlers, without losing sight of the dream of self-sufficiency that

drove Americans West. The Ingalls family did move from farm to farm, managing to produce more creditors than crops, but they never gave up on each other. They continued to find intense pleasure in the simple things of life, such as Charles's (Laura's father) playing a violin or the passage of geese flying overhead. There is a deep sweetness to their resilience, persistence, and good will, which survived despite being slapped constantly by reality. Fraser does not subtract from Wilder's stature. Quite the contrary.

As part of providing reality to Wilder, Fraser offers extensive historical context.

So why did Wilder mischaracterize so much of her past? When writing the novels, it would be natural for Wilder to gloss over anguished memories of starving as a child or of losing her baby brother when he was nine months old. Indeed, Wilder may not have been able to write the Little House series if it meant confronting her beloved father's repeated failures or how painful her childhood had been. When Wilder started the novels, her parents and her older sister, Mary, as well as her younger sister, Grace, were dead. Fraser observes that all

but one sister were "reunited in the town they had helped found, in the wooded cemetery on a rise, with a view of the fields and prairie beyond." Wilder's last sister died shortly after, which meant Wilder was the only one left of the pioneer family. Perhaps she gave herself and them the memories she desperately wished could be real. No wonder one reviewer referred to the Little House series as "a prolonged memorial service." Such longing and regret have ways of changing memories themselves.

Fraser makes the memories accurate.

The provision of history

As part of providing reality to Wilder, Fraser also offers extensive historical context and perspective on the American West. At times, *Prairie Fires* seems more like a biography of a place than of a person, perhaps because Wilder was the places and times about which she wrote; the two are inseparable.

Even controversial history is handled in an objective, straightforward manner. The discussion of Indians and the attitude of pioneers toward them is an example. The American Library Association (ALA) recently and unanimously dropped Wilder's name from its

children's literature award. Formerly called the Laura Ingalls Wilder Award, it was established in 1954, with the first one being presented to Wilder herself. It is now the Children's Literature Legacy Award. The reason: her novels contain what are alleged to be racist and anti-Indian sentiments. *The Guardian* explained, "In *Little Town on the Prairie*, Charles takes part in a minstrel show. Caroline [Laura's mother] expressed a distinct dislike of Native Americans: 'She looked as if she were smelling the smell of an Indian whenever she said the word. Ma despised Indians. She was afraid of them, too.'" Her 1935 story, "Going West," has garnered particular criticism. In it, the head of a migrating family says of their destination, "There were no people. Only Indians lived there." Wilder later changed the passage to read, say, "There were no settlers there. Only Indians lived there." Critics were not satisfied.

Lane is recognized as one the founding mothers of the modern libertarian movement.

By contrast, Fraser documents the outrageously unjust treatment of the Dakota Indians without erasing the reasons that pioneers feared

and sometimes hated them. The history of the displacement of Indians and its backlash, however, occasions a criticism of *Prairie Fires*; sometimes the setting of context interferes with the main goal of the biography, which is the life of Wilder. For example, after the introduction and before the first chapter, there is a section entitled "On the Frontier" that runs 16 pages. The section chronicles the history of the Dakota Indians, on whose land the Ingalls family squatted — a point Wilder's books never mention. As fascinating as the history may be, however, the reader begins to wonder when the main characters will appear. The interweaving could have been more skillfully done.

A brief nod to politics

In December 5, 1886, Rose Wilder Lane (1886–1968) was born to Laura Ingalls Wilder and her husband, Almanzo. Rose was their first child, and she was the only one to survive into adulthood. Lane is recognized, in general and by Fraser, as one the founding mothers of the modern libertarian movement.

In 1943, Lane published *The Discovery of Freedom: Man's Struggle against Authority*, which deeply affected 20th-century libertarianism. 1943 was also the year in which

the last book in the Little House series appeared. The two endeavors had much in common politically. Both celebrated individualism, for example, and they displayed a corresponding suspicion of authority.

Wilder and Lane came to share a deep political connection.

In real life, Wilder and Lane came to share a deep political connection through their mutual rejection of Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal policies. In her book *Libertarians on the Prairie: Laura Ingalls Wilder, Rose Wilder Lane, and the Making of the Little House Books*, Christine Woodside explained, "They both hated the New Deal. They thought the government was interfering in people's lives, that individuals during the Depression were becoming very whiny and weren't grabbing hold of their courage. The climate of America was really irritating them. The New Deal, for a lot of farmers and definitely the Wilders, made them change their politics." Many farmers were outraged by government agents who visited farms, like the one Wilder then lived on, and forced them to document how many acres they had planted in case they were over the government-enforced

maximum. A lifelong Democrat, Wilder changed her affiliation and infused her book with libertarian political views, albeit ones that were expressed indirectly.

Woodstein wrote, "With their simple, cheerful tales of self-sufficiency, the Little House stories advance ideals of maximum personal freedom and the limited need for the government. In their essence they illustrate libertarian ideals, and in this they reflect the attitudes of both women at the time they were writing the books."

An old question resolved

Prairie Fires devotes a great deal of space to the relationship between mother and daughter, which was complex, dysfunctional, and often resembled a love-hate dynamic. The portrait painted of Lane is especially unflattering.

Nevertheless, Wilder and Lane had a close writing association, which created a long-standing question that Fraser finally answers. Did Wilder actually write the books on which her name appears or was Lane the main hand at work?

Historians have struggled with how to divide credit for the Little House books, with some points being clear. It was Lane's urging that prompted Wilder, then in her early

60s, to start recording the stories of her youth. Her advanced age has raised the question of whether Wilder was a “natural” novelist, or whether Lane, who had a career history of ghostwriting, did the yeoman’s share of creation. On the other hand, Wilder had two decades of experience as an essayist and columnist for farm journals before launching into the Little House series.

There is no doubt that Lane actively guided her mother’s career and writing.

There is no doubt that Lane actively guided her mother’s career and writing, especially in the early years, providing literary contacts and aggressively editing manuscripts. Sometimes the two women blended. Wilder’s autobiographical *On the Way Home* (1962), for example, was published posthumously only after Lane had edited it and supplied additional material. Did the editing cross over into a collaboration or even into ghostwriting?

Lane denied the allegation, but it persisted and grew.

Roger Lea MacBride, who ran for president in 1976 on the Libertarian Party ticket, unintentionally contributed to the “evidence” of ghostwriting. He was unofficially

adopted as a grandson by an elderly and childless Lane. He inherited her entire estate in 1968, which included rights to Wilder’s books. It is of some interest that MacBride ignored the desire stated in Wilder’s will for the copyrights to revert to the library in Wilder’s hometown after her daughter’s death. MacBride retained them. The television show *Little House on the Prairie* was reported to be his idea and he licensed the series to NBC.

MacBride’s unintentional contribution to the ghostwriting claim came when he cooperated with a University of Missouri professor named William Holtz, who was writing a biography of Lane. The cooperation ended when MacBride realized that Holtz intended to argue for the ghostwriting theory of the Little House series. Holtz’s book was entitled *The Ghost in the Little House: A Life of Rose Wilder Lane*.

Holtz published an article in *Liberty* magazine (March 1992) entitled “The Ghost in the Little House Books,” in which he stated, “Rose Wilder Lane was more than a pioneer of libertarian thinking. She was the novelist who turned her mother’s stories into the hugely successful *Little House* novels. And along the way, she infused them with libertarian thinking...”

The impact of Holtz's book was evidenced by a *Washington Post* article (July 11, 1993) entitled "Little Fraud on the Prairie," in which the author explained how the book made her lose her lifetime passion for the Little House series because she felt betrayed and disillusioned.

Wilder and Lane
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Those who believe in Wilder's authorship offered a series of defenses. For example, manuscripts held by a museum in Mansfield — Wilder's last hometown — seemed to prove she had written the books. Defenders observed that Holtz's claim rested largely on an analysis of the drafts of only one novel — *Little Town on the Prairie* — and on the one-sided evidence of Lane's diary. MacBride even tried to limit the sales of the Holtz book. But accusations of fraud continued.

Some biographies are vehicles of justice. They fill the void of historical oversight; they correct misstatements, and say "thank you" to the unacknowledged. *Prairie Fires* is an act of justice. It rectifies a situation that should have never existed: a game of "Who is the liar? Who

is the fraud?" that pitted the legacies of mother and daughter against each other in a manner that would have appalled them both.

Through an examination of letters, diaries, unpublished manuscripts, and other documents, Fraser chronicles a dynamic that should be celebrated, rather than used as literary gossip: namely, the remarkable collaboration between Wilder and Lane, which produced remarkable results. Lane began to write her mother page after page of editorial advice circa 1910–1911, when Wilder started publishing articles in a rural magazine. She paid close attention to that advice, even though the editorial liberties taken by her daughter sometimes distressed her. Fraser notes, "These early letters establish the new basis of the relationship between Rose Lane and Laura Wilder: the daughter becoming the often domineering partner, while the once strict matriarch was forced to acknowledge her own uncertainties as she launched herself into a new realm, holding tight to her daughter's hand. This would be their relationship for the next four decades." Lane's domineering role was apparent in the early years but it was less so after Wilder had graduated from what could be called an apprenticeship

Bottom line: Wilder and Lane created the Little House phenomenon together in a partnership. The series would not have been possible without the remarkable abilities of both women. They were self-taught geniuses; Wilder wrote; Lane advised, edited constantly, and added her own embellishments. Lane's immensely significant role should be acknowledged and applauded, but they do not constitute ghostwriting.

In fact, Lane poached material and memories from her mother to use in her own writing, perhaps because she resented Wilder's great success; certainly, that is the motive Fraser ascribes. The most egregious example of poaching may be *Let the Hurricane Roar*, which was first serialized and then published as a novel. The book appeared in 1933, shortly after the first book in the Little House series was published to acclaim. Lane's novel had an identical plot as Wilder's novel *On the Banks of Plum Creek*; Wilder's book appeared later but Lane must have been familiar with the family story on which the plots were based. Moreover, Lane's story used the names "Charles" and "Caroline," despite the fact that Wilder used them in the Little House series, and it would have been trivial for Lane

to choose different ones. At first, Lane kept the serialized book secret from her mother, undoubtedly anticipating her reaction. When Wilder found out, she felt betrayed and violated. A schism formed between the two women, but it did not keep them from collaborating.

Conclusion

Wilder herself provides the best conclusion to any review of *Prairie Fires* because she sums up the message of her books and of her life in one sentence. Despite enduring great pain and several near-death experiences, the last words of her last book in the Little House series are typically inspiring. Fraser comments on *These Happy Golden Years*, "Her final novel was her last opportunity to spend time with parents long gone, her last word on a marriage that began with such joy and promise. Secure in the eternal present tense, the last thing Laura says to the reader is, 'It is a beautiful world.'"

Wendy McElroy is a fellow of the Independent Institute, and the author of The Reasonable Woman: A Guide to Intellectual Survival (Prometheus Books, 1998).

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