

Painting Government Into a Corner

by EDMUND A. OPITZ

WE use the term "public sector" to denote the sphere in which government operates, in contrast to the nonpolitical "private sector." There is a tendency in the first to expand, and as it does so the latter shrinks. On the other hand, when political power is limited the private sector automatically expands, making more people freer in more departments of their lives. A free society may be defined as one whose government is properly limited.

Political power cannot be contained except by a force more powerful than itself. Where is such a force to be found? In one place only, in men's minds.

Looking back over history we note several major concerns which have, in every age, engaged the hearts and minds of men. These divide society into seven sectors. One is government. The other six include religion, ethics, education, art, voluntary associations and economics.

One important principle on which most Americans agree is the separation of church and state. We take this for granted, hardly realizing how unique it is. This principle is frequently confused with something that sounds a little like it but is altogether different—the separation of religion from society. Jefferson, who wrote, "The God who gave us life gave us liberty at the same time," did not favor a nonreligious, secular society. He favored government neutrality toward the churches, believing that under these conditions religion could play its proper role.

Political theory in our tradition is based on the assumption that men must be free because each person has a destiny beyond society which he can

work out only under conditions of liberty. The spiritual underpinnings of our institutions have suffered erosion, and we careen toward the pre-Christian idea of the state as the universal caretaker promising to feed, clothe, house, train and guide its minions. By its very label, the Welfare State advertises its self-assumed benevolence; and by the same token it cloaks the power inherent in all political action. So successful is the disguise that it has even generated a specious religious support.

As our religious values have eroded there has been a decline of standards in ethics and a worsening of conduct. The figures on crime increase tell part of the story. As moral standards decline some people seek to correct the situation by passing laws to control behavior. But people cannot be made good by law; laws to make people good only result in making them less free.

Education is no more a necessary function of government than religion. Once we had public churches and private schools; now we have public schools and private churches. It is one function of the educator to be the gadfly of the state, but he cannot be much of a gadfly if he is on the state's payroll. When the state begins its bid for total power it must at some stage seize control of the educational system. Where there is a breakdown in the culture there is a contest to determine what values and what information will be imparted to the young, and by whom. This gives the state an opening wedge for starting a vast conditioning process. Despite assurances, government subsidy must lead to control, and control means nationalized education—a contradiction in terms.

Art disposes men to a better sense of the human condition, and thus may have far reaching political significance. For this reason it must not be under political control. We don't want an official art any more than we want an official religion. The real artist is necessarily a free spirit. Art associations and other voluntary groups draw together to share a common interest. A church is a voluntary association; so is a factory. The world-wide Georgist movement, including the school, presents a magnificent accomplishment in the realm of voluntary associations. The totalitarian state seeks to destroy all lesser loyalties within it, but in a free society voluntary associations of all sorts flourish.

The economic sector is the realm of business, industry and trade. This critical area is the prime target of those who prefer collectivism to a free society. Nearly everyone devoutly proclaims his dedication to free enterprise and the free market while simultaneously calling for more subsidies and regulations. Freedom cannot be won or retained on economic grounds alone, but it can be and is being lost there. Every collectivist ideology—from the Welfare State to totalitarian communism—is strung on a framework of economic error. People are prisoners of their beliefs, and so long as they cherish a wrong understanding of economics they will be appealed to by one form of collectivism or another.

Freedom is all of a piece, and economic freedom—within the proper moral and legal framework—is fundamental to the free society. Do we believe in religious liberty? Then unless there is private ownership of houses of worship, and private means for paying salaries, printing books and holding meetings, religion cannot be free. Do we believe in a free press? But if newsprint is a government monopoly and all printing presses are government owned, how can news-

This article is condensed from an address at the Henry George School in New York on January 22nd by Edmund A. Opitz, a senior staff member of the Foundation for Economic Education at Irvington-on-Hudson, New York, and book review editor of *The Freeman*. He is the author of two books: *The Powers That Be* and *The Kingdom Without God*, and has contributed articles and reviews widely to various publications. His activity as coordinator of *The Remnant*, a nationwide fellowship of ministers, predominately conservative or libertarian in their political and economic outlook, bespeaks his admiration for Albert Jay Nock. He helped found the Nockian Society, which operates out of his office.

In the *National Review* of January 12th Rev. Opitz reviewed Nock's *The Memoirs of a Superfluous Man*, illustrating the man's non-intrusive stance with this anecdote:

"Leonard Read went through *Our Enemy, the State* in the mid-thirties, and then wrote Nock to tell him how much he liked it. 'But how can you advocate the Single Tax?' Read asked. 'I don't advocate the Single Tax,' AJN replied; 'I merely believe in it!'"

papers be free? It is possible to have a *Daily Worker* in a capitalist country, but a *Daily Capitalist* in a communist country is inconceivable! Do we endorse academic freedom? But if government owns the schools and appoints the teachers—freedom vanishes.

The state is a pincer movement. One of its prongs consists of those who hold office and wield political power; the other consists of the private persons and pressure groups who obtain economic advantage by this wrongful exercise of power. The target of the pincer movement is the productive part of the nation, which plays the role of host for the double-barrelled parasite. This predatory action by the state—to use the term in Albert Jay Nock's sense—is utterly different from the governmental action of apprehending a criminal. The distinction is between aggressive action

in the first case, and defensive action in the second. The restoration of freedom demands that we be clear about this distinction, but it will require every bit of ingenuity and determination we possess. Moreover we are right in the middle of the picture.

Not many of our fellow Americans favor a dictatorship, but many do favor the adoption of practices which will eventually lead to authoritarian rules. The Welfare State promises that government, which is society's power structure, after using its power to divest citizens of a portion of their earnings, via taxation, will dispense the riches thus accumulated at the

bidding of the powerless; but this is a delusion. The poor and weak in our society employ no lobbyists, and the Welfare State spends its billions at the behest of its upper bracket favorites.

A free society will emerge only when men and women really desire to be free. They will then devise machinery for painting the government into a corner by preventing it from taking money from one segment in order to subsidize other segments. It will be kept out of private affairs and will administer justice—preserving the peace by acting to curb those who disturb the peace.



Urquhart Adams of Peace River, Canada, whiles away many fruitful hours reading the classics as well as current literature. He passes along this statement by Macaulay: "From the time of Ethelred the Unready until the American Revolutionary War, practically the whole of England's revenue was derived from taxes on the rental value of land. From that tax we now (1858) take less than one-fiftieth part."

Mr. Adams sees in this a warning that history will revert to the age-old pattern of oppression of the many by the few; and these few, using the weapon of land monopoly, will gain more and more control and force compliance to their dictates. Force will generate counter-force and a return to the barbarism of the Middle Ages when millions were burned at the stake for non-conformance. Free political institutions can continue only if there is economic freedom such as land value taxation would afford.

In a more contemporary vein Mr. Adams quotes and takes issue with Lord Keynes who said, "usury and avarice and precautions must be our gods for a little while longer still, for only they can lead us out of the tunnel of necessity into daylight."

To this he replies, the noble lord advises us not only to accept vice as a guide to conduct, but to bow down and worship it. Avarice is a vice synonymous with covetousness—one of the "seven deadly sins"—and usury has always been condemned as unrighteous. History records a long struggle between the forces of good and evil, and until Lord Keynes published his credo, it was understood that good was better than evil, virtue better than vice and freedom better than slavery.

Not all men have accepted that view. There have always been those who preferred vice and crime to virtue. In our generation we have seen one of the world's most advanced nations taken over by a gang of thieves and murderers, with the consent of the great majority of its citizens, and in the belief that, as Lord Keynes puts it, this gang would lead them into daylight. What a difference between his philosophy and that of Henry George who advocated mutual helpfulness, cooperation, justice and fair play to "lead us into daylight" and enable us to reach higher levels of civilization—perhaps even to insure our survival in this nuclear age.