

The Great Unasked Political Question

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It's not asked in presidential debates, in political "town hall" debates, in leftist media, in rightist media, in Wall Street demonstrations, in academia, or in polite conversation.

Yet it is the most important political question.

It is a question that reveals more about one's political beliefs than any other—more than questions about taxes, immigration, welfare, medical care, and foreign policy. Although it seems simple and perhaps sophomoric at first blush, it actually leads to better intellectual thought than esoteric discussions about positive and negative rights, public vs. private goods, individualism vs. collectivism, socialism vs. capitalism, and the philosophies of the great political and moral philosophers.

Ready? Here it is: ***When do you think government should use force?***

This is very important and relevant because government is force. Without the power to use the force of law to collect taxes or to demand certain behavior, backed up by guns and prison or worse, government would be ignored, and there would be anarchy or perhaps subjugation by a foreign power.

All political systems depend on force, whether dictatorships, monarchies, democracies, or constitutional republics. Whether laws are decreed by a dictator or monarch, or passed by a legislature, they mean nothing without enforcement; that is, application of force.

Most Americans don't think in terms of force and coercion, probably because of the government monopoly over compulsory K-12 education. Take the seemingly innocuous example of anti-smoking legislation. When citizens vote to outlaw smoking in private restaurants and bars, they don't stop to think that they are voting to use force backed up by government guns against smokers and property owners. Instead, they think, often sanctimoniously, that they are simply voting to safeguard the health of patrons, workers, and society at large. The second way of thinking seems much more benign, even virtuous.

As a result, it is not the first impulse of people, whether Democrat or Republican, to ask: Can we accomplish a given social or economic goal without using force to coerce people to comply? Often, the answer would have been yes if they had asked and thought about it. But because they didn't ask and think about it, their first impulse is to compel.

The Occupy Wall Street demonstrations are a good example. Rightly demonstrating against the way that politicians and the Federal Reserve used force against citizens to bail out their banking and investment cronies, the demonstrators simultaneously, and wrongly and hypocritically, demand that the government use force against others to pay for the things they want, such as free college tuition.

Medical care is another example. When "ObamaCare," the so-called Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act, was being debated, the right question was not asked: Can we solve the problem of the uninsured, the problem of free riders, and the problem of escalating costs, without forcing people into a one-size-fits-all system, without forcing some people to pay for other people's care and insurance, and without forcibly confiscating the income and freedom of doctors?

Having studied and written about this question extensively, I believe that the answer is not only yes, but that better outcomes would be achieved by not using force. This is not the place to explain my position in detail, but, in brief, it is about the government repealing laws and programs that get in the way of medical care or insurance being offered or provided by religious, charitable, professional, and fraternal associations and organizations—as well as by commercial enterprises.

Yes, I know all of the counter-arguments from left-liberals and progressives, including the argument that it is embarrassing and humiliating for the poor and disadvantaged to have to ask others for help. Whether this thinking is nonsense—and I believe it is—is beside the point. Even if valid, it is one-sided. It doesn't address the feelings of those who are forced under the existing social-welfare state to foot the bill. Coercion causes resentment.

Other than a few anarchists who don't want any form of government, most people would agree that an appropriate use of government force is to protect life, property, and liberty from being taken by assailants and thieves. Beyond this basic concept, there is considerable disagreement about where to draw lines. When is pre-emptive force justified? How much force should be used? How should lawbreakers be punished? How much should be spent in providing protection? These questions alone would keep politicians busy and feeling important.

Unfortunately, because the great question about the legitimacy of force isn't asked, the use of government force has expanded so far beyond basic protection that it can be found in nearly every aspect of our lives. Politicians, bureaucrats, special interests, do-gooders, social engineers, busybodies, and jingoists wanting to remake the world into their image or get something at other people's expense clamor for more laws. Every law is backed by the threat of force to compel obedience.

It is no wonder that the nation is broke and our politics is poisoned.

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