

No-Brainer

by Russell Madden

In a recent issue of *TV Guide* the actor LeVar Burton was quoted as saying that, “The attack on PBS by the new Congress is a no-brainer. Anyone who opposes funding for PBS and does anything to discourage kids’ programming should have their [sic] head examined.” He went on to say that “[It’s] the only commercial-free environment where parents can be assured that children will be introduced to their ABCs without someone trying to sell them something.”

Mr. Burton, of course, has a vested interest in PBS: he is the host of “Reading Rainbow.” This show introduces young readers to children’s books in the framework of mini-documentaries on various historical and cultural topics. I’ve enjoyed watching the program myself on occasion. I know of few who would disagree that the show is both fun and educational.

Mr. Burton’s comments and criticisms, however, reveal some common issues—and common errors—raised by nearly all defenders of the status quo in governmental funding. This includes questions regarding not only PBS, the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), and school lunch programs, but every governmental bureau, department, and office delivering goods and services to the American people. Whether it’s providing welfare, home or student loans, farming and business subsidies, or regulating the nature and supply of drugs and health

care, the same fundamental mistake propels them all. By advancing the type of argument he does, Mr. Burton not only muddies the discussion regarding spending cuts but indirectly teaches children a damaging moral lesson they are ill-equipped to resist.

The easiest part of his complaint to address is his concern about maintaining “the only commercial-free environment” for children to learn the alphabet. Leaving aside his implicit and unwarranted attack on the role and influence of business in our society, I think it’s reasonably safe to say that many preschoolers still learn their ABCs at nursery school or at home. I would hope that parents in this country have not yet entirely abrogated their responsibility and handed over the minds of their children to the tender mercies of the tube. *Pace* Mr. Burton, but most parents are quite capable of pushing in an off-button and sitting down with their offspring as they struggle with the intricacies of memorizing the alphabet.

Giving Mr. Burton the benefit of the doubt, we can assume that his anger reflects not an amazing arrogance when he suggests that opponents of federal PBS funding “should have their head examined” but arises from a genuine concern for the continuation of a worthwhile good. Here we come to the crux of the problem for all of those well-intentioned people who oppose slashing federal, state, and local programs. While there are those who engage in such heated rhetoric because they fear a lessening of their power or the outright loss of their jobs (as reflected in the title of an old book by Shirley Scheil, *Poverty Is Where the Money Is*), many people are sincere in their objections.

Unfortunately, supporters of government-funded television forget (or never recognized) that the real issue is not whether the shows on PBS are worthwhile. Few individuals would disagree, for example, that city parks, public libraries, good health care, or any number of other things are of value (at least to someone).

Critics of government spending waste their time debating the relative merits of this program or that; of defending their desire for

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cuts by stating that they aren't really cutting total dollar amounts but only the rate of increase; or by promising that few people will suffer over the long run. Many of the points made by proponents of government spending are true: concerts and plays are wonderful to attend; Medicare and Social Security provide financial support to many who would experience hard times without them; parks are wonderful places for a relaxing picnic or hike. I've seen evidence to support all those claims and more.

Yet in this issue the mere desirability of a particular good or service is totally irrelevant.

The End Never Justifies the Means

What is at stake now and always in any discussion of what programs should be managed by government is the principle of voluntary choice and action. It is this guideline which determines the proper scope of government on any level. Those who champion choice must answer the charges of their opponents that they are mean-spirited, callous, and heartless with a simple moral declaration that rests at the heart of any valid ethical system: *The end never justifies the means.*

Whether an individual desires a new car, fully funded health care, or an expanding space program, a person is never justified in obtaining such values except through mutually voluntary choice and action. The initiation of force is always wrong. Period.

People should not be coerced to hand over a part of their wealth, time, and effort—that is, they should not be forced to surrender even a tiny portion of their lives—in order to satisfy the needs, wants, and desires of anyone else, whether that person acts for himself directly as a private individual or indirectly in the guise of government on behalf of himself and/or anonymous others.

Need is not a claim on wealth.

Apparently proponents of government spending think otherwise. Rather than try to

persuade people to pay voluntarily for such worthwhile goods as "Reading Rainbow," day care facilities, or college educations, they apparently prefer the more "expedient" route of pointing the figurative gun of governmental power at our heads and rifling our pockets while our hands are in the air. Yet no one has the right to steal even one minute of someone else's life, to make anyone even a part-time slave.

Unfortunately, the existence of such a "right" is precisely what our children are learning in today's society: that if you sincerely want or need something and would have a diminished lifestyle without that value, then it is perfectly acceptable to force other people to give it to you regardless of what those others want. Given such a "morality," it is small wonder we see private criminals committing their offenses with little or no remorse as they emulate the implicit lessons of their cultural and political leaders.

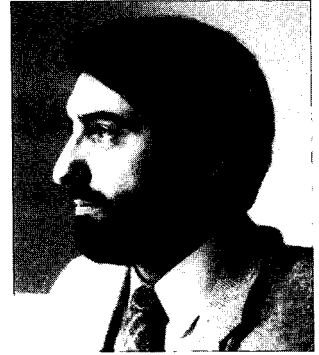
It is ironic that these same leaders decry the mounting levels of violence in our society. They point denouncing fingers at movies and television and talk shows as the initiating culprits without ever realizing their own roles in morally sanctioning and promoting the very abuses against law and order they abhor.

It is even more ironic—and sad—that most of those who find themselves victims of private crime clamor for the government to commit on their own behalf the same kind of criminal behavior against otherwise law-abiding citizens. In such a topsy-turvy world, everyone becomes a slave to everyone else without ever recognizing his own culpability or the invisible shackles which bind him.

Perhaps someday people will cease to argue about the importance of this "entitlement" or that one and focus once more upon the principle that should guide them in deciding how to act in any aspect of public (or private) life: the end never justifies the means.

That idea should be a no-brainer. □

Marketing Individualism



I am sometimes asked: How can one “mass-market” a provocative—even unpopular—philosophy, while still maintaining one’s own integrity? How can one popularize, without subordinating oneself to whatever happens to be popular?

To answer, let me give an example that should cheer *Freeman* readers.

October 1995 marks a milestone in the history of the Foundation for Economic Education. For the first time in its half-century history, select books produced by the Foundation will be available for purchase in mainstream bookstores.

This effort will begin with publication of a revised hardcover edition of my *Criminal Justice?*, plus two new volumes: *Forgotten Lessons: Selected Essays of John T. Flynn*, edited by FEE’s own Gregory P. Pavlik; and *The Foundations of American Constitutional Government*, an anthology of *Freeman* essays. By next Spring, a half-dozen new titles will be added to the list of FEE’s “trade books.” Many more will follow.

Not all FEE titles will be *stocked* in bookstores: buyers may have to special-order some of them. But our eventual aim is at least to make all FEE books *available* through bookstores. And select titles will,

in fact, be displayed prominently, and promoted heavily.

Why this change? FEE has a long tradition of publishing and educating quietly—of having students of liberty make the effort to seek out its offerings. And there is undeniable merit in an unobtrusive approach to education: it tends to screen out many whose interest is only superficial.

The growing problem with this approach, though, is the “information overload” of modern society. Today, people are bombarded with a glut of information from media that never before existed. FEE was organized even before television became popular. Now, cable TV brings scores of channels into our homes; movies are available not just in theaters, but on video cassettes; a host of specialized magazines are launched each year; computers have made many homes “off-ramps” on the Information Superhighway; chain bookstores have proliferated in every shopping mall; and books themselves are widely available on tape.

Trying to be heard in this rising clamor is a daunting task. Just as we all must compete in the economic marketplace, organizations such as FEE must compete in a “marketplace of ideas.” That realization prompted Dr. Hans Sennholz, FEE’s president, to decide that the Foundation had to revamp and modernize the way it markets its books.

Some may now worry: Will FEE’s efforts to aggressively mass-market books cause it to “water down” its principles? Or, to

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