

Impossible Dream

Why private matters make bad public policy

By Thomas W. Hazlett

Sitting atop the greatest economic engine in history, the citizenry of the U.S. of A.—when not too pooped from R&R at their Cabo time-shares or frenzied by their latest spending spree at the Mall of America—have a foreboding feeling about the course that their society is running. They sense that there are many, many things that are broken, and that they are way too busy to take the task on themselves—at least until the basketball playoffs are over.

In walks Bill Clinton, a sweet-talkin' Mr. Fix-It. The president is a governmental handyman, a statesman with a tool belt, a man who will spend \$10 million on a survey to find out what \$1 billion program the voters say they want, spend \$4 billion to give it to them, and create \$1,000 of gross value in the process. He'll mandate V-chips on TVs that are never watched; he'll create a dozen federal death penalties for crimes that never get committed; he'll create a vast federal program to inoculate our youngsters against infectious disease while we watch the vaccinated population dip. Why, he'll even strangle that ghastly Joe Camel with his own tobacco-PAC-stained fingers in a dramatic *faux* rescue of America's youth.

"I'm from the government, and I'm here to help you" used to be a punchline that translated seamlessly into any of the dozens of languages spoken in the United States. But the great talents of President Willie and his slick sales force have overcome our native skepticism of government and sent a steady stream of bumbling repairmen into the American home and workplace. Clinton is always at the front door, smilin' and telling you about today's special incentive program: "Your children will love it, it'll make your whole family healthier and wiser, and the neighbors down the block will pay for the whole thing. But you must sign up with the poll-

ster right now, because by tomorrow this fantastic program could be ended by the extremist Republican Congress."

Voter demand for such fantastic bargains remains brisk, despite the disappointing results of previous offers, thanks largely to the marketing genius of "new & improved." New Democrats and Newt Republicans repackage the recalled products of yesteryear in stunningly effective fashion. But each and every such policy sale crowds out alternatives.

Alas, the state is not about subtle trade-offs concerning Monica's desire for hatpins vs. Bill's desire for poetry but about the brutish task of divining and enforcing one-size-fits-all rules and taxes.

When politicians and bureaucrats anoint winners and losers in social decisions governing matters of personal preference, *choices* become *programs*. This seemingly subtle shift yields fabulous angles for pols spouting focus-group-tested "solutions," while rendering individuals impotent and accountability nil.

Take the public schools: Can there be a more contentious slice of social life to place in the hands of the state? Can we create any more political dyspepsia than to mandate that everyone's (or no one's) kids be rustled away and taught moral values, condom technique, Creationism, "lifestyles"—not to mention literature, history, and civics? Is *Heather Has Two Mommies* the appropriate text—or would the Jimmy Swaggart Redemption Sermon Video be preferred? As a matter of iron-clad public policy, should kids wear uniforms, segregate by gender, immerse in English or Español or Ebonics?

Not only *could* reasonable people disagree—we can predict with absolute certainty that reasonable people *will* disagree. The cultural diversity that is our democratic bonus puts parents at odds with one

another on virtually every one of a long checklist of specific educational approaches.

People on the losing end of Department of Education policy are today doing some pretty desperate deals: Local school boards have OK'd single-sex schools in an effort to beef up product. Civil libertarians are suing to stop this mischief, outraged by such a sexist use of tax dollars.

Christians are moving to amend the First Amendment to bust open the constitutional prohibition on prayer in schools. Popular with conservative GOP congressmen, the constitutional amendment proffered by Rep. Ernest Istook (R-Okla.) has actually made it out of the House Judiciary Committee.

Rather than dancing on the edge of this slippery slope, why not simply choose freedom? Under a school choice plan, folks could resolve such life-and-death conflicts without Bill of Rights brinkmanship. Those who found that their offspring's optimum was assured by Mrs. Tidy's Szechuan School for Afro-Centric Boys Wearing Knickers would be able to cash their vouchers accordingly and so realize their dream. Free to choose, people could themselves weigh costs and benefits of rival theories of education, rather than thrusting them upon the rest of us.

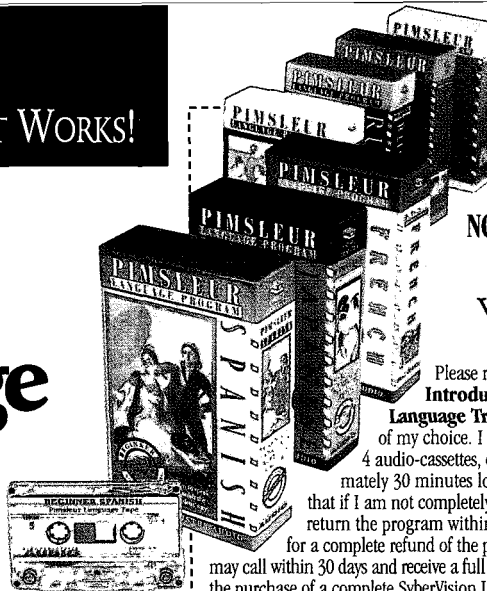
The path to a single solution that will please all is the road to nowhere. That is not to say that there aren't some who enjoy the pointless journey and profit mightily from hawking roadside souvenirs—mandatory school uniforms! increased teacher pay! national academic testing!—along the way.

Prediction: All this hellish searching for a nonexistent group solution will wear thin, one of these generations. Agreeing to disagree will be considered courteous behavior, and diversity of action may become more than a theoretical possibility. The Constitution will be safe, and the kids will all be above average. ♦

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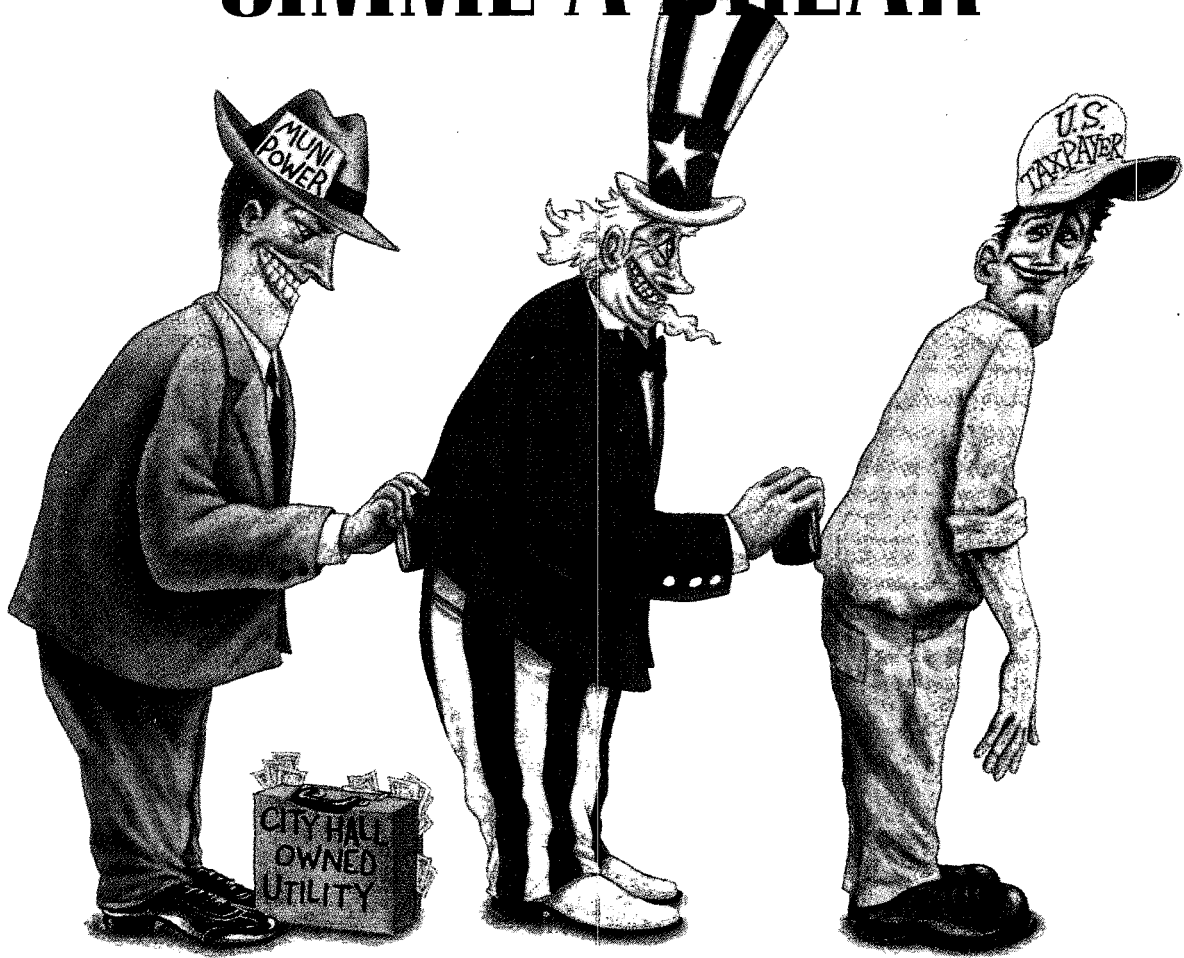
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If Congress won't push City Hall out of the electric utility business, then Congress should at least end the craven tax subsidies given to municipal owned utilities. City Hall-owned utilities should be under the same tax and regulatory rules as investor-owned utilities. It's especially galling that City Hall-owned utilities can issue tax exempt bonds that the rest of us subsidize.

Now is the time to give ordinary American families a tax break, in part, by ending the federal subsidies for the City Hall bosses and bureaucrats who shouldn't be in the utility business in the first place. **Give us a break... Get City Hall out of the power business!**

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