



THE VIEW

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DEBATING THE ROLE OF GOVERNMENT

BY
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The first national Tea Party Convention is well underway in Nashville and one can easily imagine that the anti-government rhetoric is so thick in the lobby and meeting rooms of the Gaylord Opryland Hotel that you could cut it with a knife. No doubt, much of the jawing centers on the alleged intrusiveness of government into our private lives. There is a growing faction in this country who wants no part of government unless it shows up for a cause that they agree with.

For example, most – no make that all – in the great Opryland banquet room on this blustery night want the government to show up in full force to put a halt to abortion. But switch to other issues where the intrusiveness of government might be equally effective and these same folks will slam the door in the face of so brutal an interloper.

Take for instance the newest villain of the “personal choices/public consequences” scene – sugar sweetened beverages and their close companion obesity. With the victory over big tobacco all but complete, as evidenced by eye popping law suits and suitably punitive taxes now virtually uniform across the country, the spot light is turning to obesity and its causes. In fact a number of articles have appeared in leading publications recently calling the health consequences of obesity more damaging and costly than those of smoking. When that light shines on these issues, Mississippi doesn’t fare well at all. In fact, the state that fights annually to escape its customary position as the poorest in the union is beset by the paradox of being, by one set of measures, the most malnourished in the country and at the same time carrying the title as the most obese. Travel very much outside of the State of Mississippi and you will find that this is one batch of demographic data that has the rest of the nation puzzled.

As one might expect, government solutions are being proposed. Only recently, the mere mention of taxing sugar-sweetened beverages as both a deterrent to the number one cause of obesity – sugar consumption – and as a generator of revenue was met with laughter of

disbelief. Any political candidate who embraced such a move by government was quickly drawn and quartered as a denizen of the “nanny state.” Now Mississippi has joined other states in considering just such legislation. The rationale behind increased taxation on sugar-sweetened beverages follows that of the tobacco tax. An increase in taxes, the argument goes, will curb what the government deems undesirable behavior, and it will generate revenue that stands to offset the health costs of making such ill advised choices.

But, there is a counter to this argument. Those in opposition are increasingly vocal in wanting to know when “enough is enough” in what they would claim is government’s continually expanding intrusion into our private lives. Smokers have been relegated by government to back alleys to smoke highly-taxed cigarettes outside of the breathing space of non-smokers. Those on this side of the issue constantly ask what business is it of government what one does on those famous soft drink breaks at “10:00, 2:00, and 4:00.”

No doubt the crux of these arguments and, for that matter, those at the Tea Party Convention is the age old one that “the government has no business regulating what I put in my own body as long as I am not harming anyone else.” This is indeed an argument of which they can be proud. Ironically, they are not the first to make it.

This has been the rallying cry since the 1960’s for those who have advocated the legalization of marijuana. Medical marijuana, fairly loosely defined, is allowed in some 16 states and possession of small amounts of pot has been “decriminalized” in many others. Are the same “keep the government out of our private lives” types prepared to defend the fellow who wishes to relax on his back porch with an ice cold glass of sugary cola and a “joint” of his best homegrown marijuana? There are many who will offer the argument “what business is it of the government as long as I’m not harming anyone?”

I am sure if they come to any conclusions in Nashville, Jackson, or anywhere else there are many in government who would long to benefit from such clarity. Until then, expect continuation of the debate of the appropriate role of government in regulating the choices we make in our private lives.



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