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HOW THE STATE LEADS PEOPLE TO DESTRUCTION

Robert Higgs

The following is Robert Higgs's Schlarbaum Award Acceptance Speech, delivered on October 12, 2007, at the Mises Institute's 25th Anniversary Celebration.

Margaret Atwood's poem "Siren Song" begins:

*This is the one song everyone
would like to learn: the song
that is irresistible:
the song that forces men
to leap overboard in squadrons
even though they see the beached skulls.*

Our rulers know how to sing that song, and they sing it day and night. The beached skulls are those of our fathers and our sons, our friends and our neighbors, for whom the song proved not only irresistible, but fatal.

The state is the most destructive institution human beings have ever devised—a fire that, at best, can be controlled for only a short time before it o'erleaps its improvised confinements and spreads its flames far and wide.

Whatever promotes the growth of the state also weakens the capacity of individuals in civil society to fend off the state's depredations and therefore augments the public's multifaceted victimization at the hands of state functionaries. Nothing promotes the growth of the state as much as national emergency—war and other crises comparable to war in the seriousness of the threats they pose.

States, by their very nature, are perpetually at war—not always against foreign foes, of course, but always against their own subjects. The state's most fundamental purpose, the activity without which it cannot even exist, is robbery. The state gains its very sustenance from robbery, which it pretties up ideologically by giving it a different name (*taxation*) and by striving to sanctify its intrinsic crime as permissible and socially necessary. State propaganda, statist ideologies, and long-established routine combine to convince many people that they have a legitimate obligation, even a moral duty to pay taxes to the state that rules their society.



They fall into such erroneous moral reasoning because they are told incessantly that the tribute they fork over is actually a kind of price paid for essential services received, and that in the case of certain services, such as protection from foreign and domestic aggressors against their rights to life, liberty, and property, only the government can provide the service effectively. They are not permitted to test this claim by resorting to competing suppliers of law, order, and security, however, because the government enforces a monopoly over the production and distribution of its alleged “services” and brings violence to bear against would-be competitors. In so doing, it reveals the fraud at the heart of its impudent claims and gives sufficient proof that it is not a genuine protector, but a mere protection racket.

All governments are, as they must be, oligarchies: only a relatively small number of people have substantial effective discretion to make critical decisions about how the state’s power will be brought to bear. Beyond the oligarchy itself and the police and military forces that compose its Praetorian Guard, somewhat larger groups constitute a supporting coalition. These groups provide important financial and other support to the oligarchs and look to them for compensating rewards—legal privileges, subsidies, jobs, exclusive franchises and licenses, transfers of financial income and wealth, goods and services in kind, and other booty—channeled to them at the expense of the mass of the people. Thus, the political class in general—that is, the oligarchs, the Praetorian Guards, and the supporting coalition—

uses government power (which means ultimately the police and the armed forces) to exploit everyone outside this class by wielding or threatening to wield violence against all who fail to pay the tribute the oligarchs demand or to obey the rules they dictate.

Democratic political forms and rituals, such as elections and formal administrative proceedings, disguise this class exploitation and trick the masses into the false belief that the government’s operation yields them net benefits. In the most extreme form of misapprehension, the people at large become convinced that, owing to democracy, they themselves “are the government.”

Individual passages back and forth across the boundary between the political class and the exploited class testify, however, to nothing more than the system’s cunningly contrived flexibility and openness. Although the system is inherently exploitative and cannot exist in any other form, it allows some leeway at the margins in the determination of which specific individuals will be the shafters and which the shaftees. At the top, a modest degree of “circulation of elites” within the oligarchy also serves to mask the political system’s essential character.

It is a sound interpretive rule, however, that anything that cannot be accomplished except with the aid of threats or the actual exercise of violence against unoffending persons cannot be beneficial to one and all. The mass belief in the general beneficence of democracy represents a kind of Stockholm syndrome writ large. Yet, no matter how widely this syndrome may extend, it cannot alter the basic fact that owing to

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the operation of government as we know it—that is, government without genuine, express, individual consent—a minority lives on balance at the expense of the rest, and the rest therefore lose on balance in the process, while the oligarchs (elected or not, it scarcely matters) preside over the enormous web of criminal organizations we know as the state.

Notwithstanding the ideological enchantment with which official high priests and statist intellectuals have beguiled the plundered class, many members of this class retain a capacity to recognize at least some of their losses, and hence they sometimes resist further incursions on their rights by publicly expressing their grievances, by supporting political challengers who promise to lighten their burdens, by fleeing the country, and, most important, by evading or avoiding taxes and by violating legal prohibitions and regulatory restraints on their actions, as in the so-called underground economy, or “black market.”

These various forms of resistance together compose a force that opposes the government’s constant pressure to expand its domination. These two forces, working one against the other, establish a locus of “equilibrium,” a boundary between the set of rights the government has overridden or seized and the set of rights the plundered class has somehow managed to retain, whether by formal constitutional constraints or by everyday tax evasion, black-market transactions, and other defensive violations of the government’s oppressive rules.

Politics in the largest sense can be viewed as the struggle to push this boundary one way or the other. For members of the political class, the crucial question is always: how can we push out the frontier, how can we augment the government’s dominion and plunder, with net gain to ourselves, the exploiters who live not by honest production and voluntary exchange, but by fleecing those who do so?

National emergency—war or a similarly menacing crisis—answers the political

class’s crucial question more effectively than anything else, because such a crisis has a uniquely effective capacity to dissipate the forces that otherwise would obstruct or oppose the government’s expansion.

Virtually any war will serve, at least for a while, because in modern nation-states the outbreak of war invariably leads the masses to “rally ‘round the flag,” regardless of their previous ideological stance in relation to the government.

Recall the situation in 1941, for example, when public-opinion polls and other evidence indicated that a great majority of the American people (approximately 80 percent as late as autumn) opposed outright engagement in the world war, an engagement that Franklin D. Roosevelt and his administration had been seeking relentlessly by hook and by crook from the very beginning. When news of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor reached the public, mass opposition to war dissolved overnight almost completely. No wonder the neocon intriguers, in a September 2000 report of the Project for the New American Century, expressed their yearning for “some catastrophic and catalyzing event—like a new Pearl Harbor.”

Although other kinds of great crises may not elicit the same immediate submission to the government’s announced program for the people’s salvation, they may prove equally effective if they are sufficiently menacing and persistent. Thus, the Great Depression, which pushed millions of Americans into economic desperation in the early 1930s, was eventually viewed by almost everybody as, in Justice Brandeis’s words, “an emergency more serious than war.” Other pregnant crises have included nationwide strikes or widespread labor disturbances, so-called energy crises, such as those of the 1970s, perceived crime waves, great epidemics or health scares, and, lately, even a bogus scare about global warming.

In 2001, the attacks of 9/11 answered to perfection the neocon prayer for “a new Pearl Harbor.” An administration that had been wallowing without a breeze in its sails was suddenly invested with overwhelming public support for aggressive military action abroad. In a Gallup poll taken during September 7–10, 2001, 51 percent of the respondents approved of “the way George W. Bush [was] handling his job as president,” 39 percent disapproved, and 10 percent had no opinion—yielding an “opinion balance” of +12 percent (= 51–39). A few days later, while the ruins of the World Trade Center’s twin towers were still smoldering, 86 percent approved, 10 percent disapproved, and only 4 percent had no opinion—an opinion balance of +76 percent, or more than six times greater than it had been just a few days earlier. Although Bush had done absolutely nothing to demonstrate an abruptly improved performance of his job as president, nearly the entire population, many members of which roundly disliked the president, suddenly showered approbation on his performance in office. A week later, the opinion balance had risen even higher, to 84 percent, on the strength of a 90-percent approval response.

Afterward, Bush’s job-performance-approval rating followed a long downward trend, interrupted by only brief upticks, until it reached its present range. In the Gallup poll of July 6–8, 2007, the opinion balance was negative 37 percent, and only 29 percent of the respondents rated the president’s performance favorably. (In more recent polls, the balance has stood a few points higher in the president’s favor, but such small differences have little significance.) During the long downhill slide, Bush’s performance-approval rating held up amazingly well among Republicans, but fell lower and lower among both Democrats and independents—an expression of how normal political partisanship reasserted itself as the initial,

unifying crisis slipped farther and farther into the background.

Similar movements may be seen in the Gallup polls that asked the respondents whether they viewed George W. Bush himself favorably or unfavorably: here, the opinion balance jumped from +25 percent in August 2001 to +76 percent in November 2001—a three-fold increase—before beginning a long downward trend and becoming increasingly negative after mid-2005.

When the public’s approval of the president’s actions is broken down by specific issues, we see that his greatest 9/11-related jump occurred in the area of—*mirabile dictu*—foreign affairs. In the Gallup poll taken during July 10–11, 2001, the opinion balance in this area was +21 percent (54 percent favorable minus 33 percent unfavorable), but in the poll taken during October 5–6, 2001, the opinion balance had jumped to 67 percent, or more than three times higher (81 percent favorable minus 14 percent unfavorable).

The lesson is clear: if the president conducts foreign policy so as to antagonize foreigners and provoke them to launch massively destructive attacks on this country, the American public will respond with an enormous outpouring of approval of his actions, as if to prove that in our political system no failure goes unrewarded.

Bertrand Russell long ago stated the underlying condition for this sort of perverse public reaction when he remarked that “neither a man nor a crowd nor a nation can be trusted to act humanely or to think sanely under the influence of a great fear.” Indeed, the fundamental condition of the entire process by which the government leads people to their own destruction is widespread public fear, which causes people to put aside their normal distrust of the state and to turn to it, especially to its chief, as a child turns to a parent, for security and reassurance that everything will be okay if only people do as they are told.

Not only did the events of September 11, 2001, cause the American public to look more favorably on the president as a person, as a president, and as the principal architect of US foreign policy, but those events also apparently caused the public to express more trust in the federal government in general in its handling of *both* international and domestic matters.

In the Gallup poll of September 7–10, 2001, 68 percent of the respondents expressed “a great deal” or a “fair amount” of trust and confidence in the government’s handling of international problems, whereas 31 percent expressed “not very much” or “none at all,” which implied an opinion balance of +37 percent (= 68-31). A month later, in the poll conducted during October 11–14, this opinion balance had risen to 67 percent (= 83-16), almost doubling. The public’s perversely increased trust in the government had also spilled inexplicably onto its handling of domestic problems, increasing this opinion balance from 22 percent (= 60-39) in the early September poll to 56 percent (= 77-21) in the October poll.

A final measure of public opinion, “trust in Washington to do what is right,” which is normally a fairly stable indicator, also rose in an unusual way owing to 9/11. In the Gallup poll of July 6–9, 2000, 42 percent of the respondents expressed confidence that the government will do what is right “just about always” or “most of the time,” whereas 58 percent responded “only some of the time” or “never,” which implies an opinion balance of negative 16 percent. When the pollsters next asked this question, in October 5–6, 2001, however, the opinion balance had risen to +21 percent (= 60-39), indicating a complete turnaround toward greater trust than distrust in government.

At the time of these events, as I considered everything that was going on, I was dismayed by what seemed to me to be a wholly unwarranted public stampede into the protective arms of the federal

government—the same government that had been robbing and abusing most of the people in countless ways for as long as they could remember. Hardly anyone asked whether the government’s actions abroad might actually have provoked the 9/11 attacks—of course, most were so ignorant of those actions that they had no inkling of how the government might have created such a provocation. Many people seemed consumed by a combination of fear and rage that manifested itself in a desire to “nuke” someone, anyone, who might have had something to do with the attacks. Standards of proof fell precipitously. People didn’t want careful investigation; they didn’t want to “get to the bottom” of what had happened. Instead, they wanted action, and in particular they wanted the government to “strike back” immediately at any and all plausible targets.

In searching for the cause of this tremendous, rationally unjustified “rallying ‘round the flag,” we do not have far to go. Such public reactions are always driven by a combination of fear, ignorance, and uncertainty against a background of intense jingoistic nationalism, a popular culture predisposed toward violence, and a general inability to distinguish between the state and the people at large.

Because the government ceaselessly sings the siren song, relentlessly propagandizing the public to look upon it as their protector—such alleged protection being the principal excuse for its routinely robbing them and violating their natural rights—and because the mass media incessantly magnify and spread the government’s propaganda, we can scarcely be surprised if that propaganda turns out to have entered deeply into many people’s thinking, especially when they are in a state of near-panic. Unable to think clearly in an informed way, most people fall back on a childlike us-against-them style of understanding the perceived threat and what should be done about it.

If any resistance should arise to the rulers' war-making, the state has a time-tested means of disposing of the resisters. Perhaps the classic description of this tactic was given by the Nazi bigwig Hermann Göring when he was being held in prison during the trials at Nuremberg in 1946. This account comes to us from Gustave M. Gilbert, the German-speaking prison psychologist who had free access to all of the prisoners during the trials and talked to them frequently in private. On the evening of April 18, 1946, Gilbert visited Göring in his cell, and he later described their conversation as follows:

"We got around to the subject of war again and I said that, contrary to his attitude, I did not think that the common people are very thankful for leaders who bring them war and destruction."

"Why, of course, the *people* don't want war," Göring shrugged. "Why would some poor slob on a farm want to risk his life in a war when the best that he can get out of it is to come back to his farm in one piece. Naturally, the common people don't want war; neither in Russia nor in England nor in America, nor for that matter in Germany. That is understood. But, after all, it is the *leaders* of the country who determine the policy and it is always a simple matter to drag the people along, whether it is a democracy or a fascist dictatorship or a Parliament or a Communist dictatorship."

"There is one difference," I pointed out. "In a democracy the people have some say in the matter through their elected representatives, and in the United States only Congress can declare war."

"Oh, that is all well and good, but, voice or no voice, the people can always be brought to the bidding of the leaders. That is easy. All you have to do is tell them they are being attacked and denounce the pacifists for lack of patriotism and exposing the country to danger. It works the same way in any country" (*Nuremberg Diary*, pp. 278–79).

Göring was right, and matters have only become worse in this regard during the past sixty years. Under the postwar regime in the United States, of course, Congress never declares war—it has made no such declaration since June 5, 1942, when it declared war on Romania, Bulgaria, and Hungary—and the president now wages war solely at his own pleasure and caprice, as if he were Caesar.

"Dragging the people along," as Göring put it, remains as easy as ever, because, as we have seen, an initial incident, even one the government itself has provoked or trumped up, invariably causes the masses to rally 'round the flag. We have also seen, however, that the ardent enthusiasm and mindless support for the government's war-making begins to erode soon afterward. When the people increasingly come to their senses, as casualties and other costs accumulate and as bits and pieces of the truth seep out, why does the system not revert to the *status quo ante bellum*?

The answer is that actions taken during the early days of the crisis, when the government responds practically without opposition to the public's fear and desire for retribution by vastly expanding its powers (Stage II of the ratchet phenomenon), take the form of political, legal, and institutional changes that set precedents or become so deeply embedded that not all of them are abandoned during the postcrisis stage of incomplete retrenchment (Stage IV of the ratchet phenomenon).

For example, soon after the Pearl Harbor attack, the government enacted the First War Powers Act (December 18, 1941) and the Second War Powers Act (March 27, 1942). These sweeping delegations empowered the president to rearrange the executive branch as he pleased, gave him a free hand to contract with munitions suppliers almost as he pleased, and gave him far-reaching control over international financial transactions and censorship power over all communications between the United States

and *any* foreign country; they expanded the government's powers to seize private property for war purposes, empowered the president to set priorities for deliveries of designated goods and services, and gave the president effectively unrestrained power over resource allocation in the domestic economy, a power he delegated to the War Production Board under his direct oversight. Wielding all this authority, the president and his lieutenants became in effect central planners of a command economy for the duration of the war.

Similarly, just six weeks after the 9/11 attacks, the government enacted the USA PATRIOT Act, which greatly trenched on civil liberties and long-established rights, effectively demolished the Fourth Amendment, and gave a mighty boost to the US police state. Other measures moving in the same direction followed soon afterward, including nationalization of the airline-security industry and creation of the bureaucratic monstrosity known as the Department of Homeland Security, an organization as menacing in its ideological underpinnings as it is feckless and absurd in its day-to-day operations.

Once the government has expanded greatly at the outset of a war or other crisis and then employed its new powers for an extended period, getting rid of all the new weapons in the government's arsenal of power is virtually impossible even when the emergency ends and people clamor for a return to normal arrangements. Therefore, many of the crisis measures become permanent parts of the government's apparatus for dominating and robbing those outside the political class.

Wartime organizations may be retained to carry out new functions, as, for example, the War Finance Corporation of World War I was kept going for six years after the war, providing subsidized credit to exporters, agricultural cooperatives, and rural banks. After finally having been discontinued in 1925, it was revived in 1932 as the

Reconstruction Finance Corporation, a huge lender to politically favored railroads, banks, and insurance companies during the Depression, and later the government's chief agency for financing a variety of military-industrial undertakings during World War II. Retained after 1945, the RFC continued to make subsidized loans to privileged borrowers until it sank in a storm of scandal in 1953, only to be replaced—as a political *quid pro quo*—by a similarly egregious agency, the Small Business Administration, which has continued its politically driven misallocation of taxpayer money ever since.

Cases such as that of the War Finance Corporation and its direct descendants exemplify how national emergency solidifies so-called iron triangles: alliances of government bureaucrats, congressional overseers, and privileged private-sector beneficiaries. These arrangements are called “iron” because they are so difficult to break. Their beneficiaries have great incentive to fight for the retention and even for the expansion of the triangle's activities, whereas the general public rarely has much incentive to fight against them, even when it is aware of them, because the public burden per capita is normally too small to justify anyone's expenditure of much time or effort in the requisite politicking.

Under modern conditions, high wartime taxes always stick to some extent, leaving the amount of the government's plunder much greater after the war than it was before the war. In the present so-called war on terror, the government has partially concealed this increased seizure of private property by running up the national debt, rather than by jacking up ordinary tax rates or imposing new kinds of taxes, but this financial trick does not alter the raw fact that the government has been using more of the people's resources for its own purposes, as shown by the rapid run-up of its spending, leaving the public on the hook to pay the increased interest and

eventually to repay the principal, or to suffer the consequences if the government should attempt in effect to repudiate its obligations to creditors by inflating the money stock. During the present Bush administration, Treasury debt held by the public has grown from \$3.3 trillion (end FY 2001) to an estimated \$5.1 trillion (end FY 2007), or by about 53 percent in only six years.

During the Great Depression, governments at every level greatly increased their tax revenues, by imposing new kinds of taxes—state and local sales taxes, for example, and an undistributed-profits tax at the federal level. In fiscal year 1940, with the Depression still lingering, the federal government collected 57 percent more total revenue than it had in the prosperous year 1927. Federal taxes relative to GNP doubled between 1933 and 1940.

Apart from the financial legacies that exacerbate the government's burden on the public, national emergencies leave institutional legacies of various kinds that enhance government power at the expense of the people's liberties. The rent controls of World War II, for example, never ended here in New York City. For more than sixty years, they have denied landlords and tenants the liberty to contract on any mutually agreeable terms, and they have created incentives that foster the avoidance of maintenance for rented apartments and discourage the construction of the new structures that would be built if only the housing market were free of these war-borne fetters.

The institutional legacies of the New Deal, of course, are legion even now, nearly seventy years after FDR's political momentum petered out: a vast system of agribusiness subsidies; intricate regulations of financial markets, union-management relations, and financial intermediaries; federal insurance of bank deposits, home mortgages, and other financial liabilities; direct federal involvement in electricity production and distribution—the list goes on and on.

Perhaps most important, crisis has effects on the dominant ideology that work in favor of long-lasting government power and the permanent reduction of public liberties. During wartime or other crises, governments take many actions that would be more or less unthinkable in a reasonably free society during normal times, because people would not tolerate them. Having tolerated them during a national emergency, however, people may come to regard them not only as permanently tolerable, but even as desirable.

For example, nearly everything the US government did during the Great Depression had an obvious wartime precedent in the Great War. President Herbert Hoover declared, "We used such emergency powers to win the war; we can use them to fight the depression." Everything from the Depression-era agricultural price controls to the industrial cartelization program, the public housing program, the schemes to control oil and coal prices, the tax hikes, and the promotion of labor unionization had a precedent during 1917–18. Obviously, many of these war-inspired public policies then became permanent after the 1930s, as did, later, the military-industrial complex created from 1940 to 1945. People can get used to almost anything, especially if it has a plausible justification. War and other great crises managed by government soften up formerly free people and habituate them to government controls and abuses that they would resist except for their alleged emergency necessity. In this way, government emergency measures change the very character of once-free people, by breaking down their will to be free and their determination to resist home-grown tyranny.

It is important to appreciate that all the effects on freedom that I have been discussing occur regardless of the rationale for the war or other crisis intervention itself. One may regard a war, for example, as ever so necessary and desirable or not, yet these effects will occur in

any event. The logic of a government at war asserts itself in more or less the same fashion regardless of the war's provocation and purpose, because every major war requires the government to take a much bigger bite out of the people's resources quickly, and it cannot do so successfully without suppressing many normal liberties and rights, especially those that might be exercised to obstruct the government's wartime programs and policies or to persuade people to resist the war or to demand its discontinuation or settlement.

Hence, as Göring noted, the government and its supporters vigorously denounce all those who stand in the way as traitors, and the state encourages the masses to act as amateur G-men, identifying "disloyal" citizens, hounding them into buckling under, and reporting them to governmental authorities. Great peacetime initiatives operate similarly. Many historians have noted the parallels between the government's intimidating public efforts to entice or browbeat people into cooperation with the National Recovery Administration and the Nazi extravaganzas being staged in Germany at the same time.

Nowadays, for example, the government frequently encourages all of us to report any "suspicious" persons or actions to the police or the FBI, ostensibly to prevent terrorism. Needless to say, no free society can exist when everyone in effect has enlisted as a government informant, especially when the character of the threatening persons and actions is so vague that it is bound to give rise to abuses. Not uncommonly now, people are reported for nothing more than looking like an Arab or for speaking a strange language to strange-looking companions. This insidious enlistment of informants, so reminiscent of the atrocious American Protective League during World War I, is turning our once-open society into a sort of East Germany redux. Horror stories abound of perfectly innocent persons taken into custody for interrogation or worse.

While the government promotes mindless support of its war-making and may induce a sort of patriotic hysteria in the most mentally fragile personalities, many citizens swing into action as faux patriots on strictly opportunistic grounds. War contractors, for example, may be able to position themselves to make a killing, so to speak, off of the actual killing; moreover, they may parlay their wartime business as government suppliers into profitable postwar business that long outlives the war itself. The aircraft companies that suddenly profited so greatly during World War II, for example, became permanent, highly successful feeders at the government's trough, where some of them are feasting lavishly even now, the current administration's military buildup having proved a godsend for them and a boon to their stockholders. Other people simply want a cushy job in the government's expanded wartime bureaucracy.

The so-called war on terror has given rise to a huge industry that has emerged almost from scratch during the past few years. According to a 2006 *Forbes* report, the Department of Homeland Security and its predecessor agencies paid private contractors at least \$130 billion after 9/11, and other federal agencies have spent a comparable amount. Thus, besides the *military-industrial-congressional complex* (MICC), we now have a parallel *security-industrial-congressional complex* (SICC).

Between 1999 and 2006, the number of federal homeland-security contractors increased from nine companies to 33,890, and a multibillion-dollar industry selling security-related goods and services has emerged complete with specialized newsletters, magazines, websites, consultants, trade shows, job-placement services, and a veritable army of lobbyists working around the clock to widen the river of money that flows to these opportunists. As Paul Harris wrote, "America is in the grip of a business based on fear." The last thing these vultures want, of course, is an abatement

of the perceived terrorist threat, and we can count on them to hype any signs of an increase in such threats and, of course, to crowd the trough, happily slurping up the taxpayers' money.

What chance does peace have when millions of well-heeled, politically connected opportunists of all stripes depend on the continuation of a state of war for their personal financial success? For members of Congress, the Department of Homeland Security has quickly become the most magnificent dispenser of pork and patronage to come along in decades. Everyone is happy here, except for the beleaguered ordinary citizens, whose pockets are being picked and whose liberties are being overridden by politicians and private-sector predators with utter contempt for the people's intelligence and rights. Yet, so long as the people continue to be consumed by fear and to fall for the age-old swindle that the government seeks only to protect them, these abuses will never end.

Along the Gulf Coast during the past two years, a legion of opportunists has similarly rushed onto the scene to take advantage of the unprecedented sums of federal money pouring into the area in the guise of financing recovery from the damage wreaked by hurricanes Katrina and Rita. Bank accounts have been stuffed with this loot, to be sure, but little in the way of genuine recovery and reconstruction has sprung from it. Never mind: in the immortal words of President Bush, "Brownie, you're doin' a heck of a job." The ridiculous Brownie was subsequently sacked as the head of FEMA, of course, but the "heck of a job" goes on as before, all at taxpayer expense and at great profit for the corporatist cronies, political favorites, and other privileged parties who are appropriating the people's money after it has been duly laundered through the federal treasury.

Recall Margaret Atwood's poem "Siren Song," with which I prefaced my remarks. It begins,

*This is the one song everyone
would like to learn: the song
that is irresistible:
the song that forces men
to leap overboard in squadrons
even though they see the beached skulls.*

And the poem ends,

*Alas
it is a boring song
but it works every time.*

In the present regard, it works every time because the people falsely believe that those who sing it are their protectors, rather than their exploiters. Until people learn to disregard the state's siren song of beneficence and protection, they will continue to suffer and die as victims of the state's wars, foreign and domestic. People yearn for security, and they look to the state to provide it, but they are calling upon a wolf to guard the sheep.

The state cannot refrain from crime because it is an inherently criminal enterprise, living by robbery (which it relabels taxation) and retaining its turf by mass murder (which it relabels war). Constantly singing the siren song, it seduces the people by giving back to them a portion of what it has previously extorted from them and by ceaselessly claiming to protect them from all manner of threats to their lives, liberties, property, and even their self-esteem. If it protects them at all, however, it does so only as a shepherd protects his captive flock: not because he recognizes and respects the natural rights of his sheep, but only to keep them unmolested in his sole possession and control until he finds it expedient to shear or slaughter them.

A peaceful state is an impossibility. Even a state that refrains from fighting foreigners goes on fighting its own subjects continuously, to keep them under its control and to suppress competitors who might try to break into the domain of its protection racket. The people cry out for security, yet they will not take

responsibility for their own protection, and like the mariners of Greek mythology, they leap overboard immediately in response to the state's siren song.

When the Israelites had fled from their captivity in Egypt, they made do for centuries with only judges, yet they were not satisfied, and eventually they demanded a king, crying out:

“We will have a king over us; That we also may be like all the nations; and that our king may judge us, and go out before us, and fight our battles” (1 Samuel 8:19–20).

Well, they got a king all right, just as we Americans have embraced one of our own, though we call ours a president. The Israelites, as the prophet Samuel had warned, were no better off for having a king; however, King Saul only led them from one slaughter to another (1 Samuel 14: 47–48). Likewise, our rulers

have led us from one unnecessary slaughter to the next; and, to make matters worse, they have exploited each such occasion to fasten their chains around us more tightly. Like the ancient Israelites, we Americans shall never have real, lasting peace so long as we give our allegiance to a king—that is, in our case, to the whole conglomeration of institutionalized exploiters and murderers we know as the state. ■

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July 27–August 2, 2008 • Auburn, Alabama
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