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## **Would-Be Rulers without Clothes** **by Sheldon Richman**

In a presidential debate with Sen. Barack Obama in Texas, Sen. Hillary Clinton scoffed at the idea that buying medical insurance should be voluntary. “It would be as though Social Security were voluntary [or] Medicare, one of the great accomplishments of President Johnson, was voluntary.... We would not have a social compact with Social Security and Medicare if everyone did not have to participate. I want a universal health care plan,” she said.

This is what passes for deep political thought these days. Discount the contradictory nonsense about the social compact. A true compact would be voluntary. When are you ever asked to sign it?

Look closely at what Clinton is saying. She wants something (“universal health care”), therefore people should be forced to give it to her. (No thought is given to how the free market could accomplish the goal peacefully. Consider how many luxuries even the government-hampered marketplace has made universal and affordable.)

If you and I claimed something like this in private life, we’d be branded as boors. And if we took steps to accomplish it, we’d be arrested for theft or extortion, as well we should be.

Why are presidents and presidential candidates exempt from the normal and reasonable rules of morality? On its face, this is absurd. How can a subset of the human race possess rights and powers not possessed by all?

All of us are taught as children not to hit others, not to take their belongings without permission, and not to break our promises. If we need the cooperation of other people, we are expected to rely on persuasion. Force is forbidden. These are sound principles that underpin any decent society, and we are expected to observe them when we become adults. Indeed, both the criminal law and the civil law embody these principles in their prohibitions against murder, assault, burglary, theft, and breach of contract.

But when a politician advocates forcing people to go along with his grand plans, the normal rules are suspended and different rules take their place. In the political world, people who

have never bothered anyone may be coerced into participating in a politician's scheme for no reason other than that the scheme allegedly won't work if there isn't universal participation.

Well, excuse me, but that's not a good enough reason.

It's a measure of how far removed politics is from normal morality that even to raise this issue seems slightly peculiar. Comparing a politician to a common criminal just isn't done in polite society. But think about it. Imagine that Clinton was your neighbor and that she came up with a plan for a neighborhood association that would provide a variety of services, including medical coverage and pensions. "My plan won't work unless everyone participates," she says. She proceeds to threaten anyone who refuses to go along. What would you think of this woman? If she demanded your money at gunpoint, you would call the cops, wouldn't you?

### **Politics, force, and morality**

So why the moral exemption for presidential candidates? Aggressive force is aggressive force. Does it matter who wields it? The fact is, someone who refuses to participate in government programs — Social Security, Medicare, universal health care — has not disturbed the peace. He has not coerced anyone. He has simply minded his own business. Thus, the government should leave him alone. The "live and let live" principle used to be valued by the American people. But it's now largely forgotten. No one wants to face this issue. Where do government officials get the authority to compel peaceful people to finance and participate in their social programs? Some might reply that the authority comes from the people themselves. But how can that be? We've already seen that you and I have no authority to initiate force against others. If we do it anyway, we are criminals. So how can all of us together have such authority? We can't.

The rights of the whole can't be greater than the sum of the rights of its parts. Frédéric Bastiat wrote in *The Law*,

If every person has the right to defend — even by force — his person, his liberty, and his property, then it follows that a group of men have the right to organize and support a common force to protect these rights constantly. Thus the principle of collective right — its reason for existing, its lawfulness — is based on individual right. And the common force that protects this collective right cannot logically have any other purpose or any other mission than that for which it acts as a substitute. Thus, since an individual cannot lawfully use force against the person, liberty, or property of another individual, then the common force — for the same reason — cannot lawfully be used to destroy the person, liberty, or property of individuals or groups.

No one has come up with a valid counterargument to Bastiat's point. There is none. Moreover, his principle is as "American" as an idea can be. It's what Thomas Jefferson meant when he wrote, "All men are created equal" in the Declaration of Independence. He certainly did

not mean that people are equal in intelligence, talent, energy, ambition, physical strength, and so on. And he couldn't have meant that they should merely be equal before the law, because that would be a low bar indeed; we can imagine a society in which the law treats everyone rather poorly but nonetheless equally. Even equality of freedom doesn't capture what Jefferson meant because societies have existed in which virtually everyone had an equally small measure of freedom.

There need not be any mystery about what Jefferson meant. Roderick Long (<http://tinyurl.com/34gqmx>) reminds us that Jefferson borrowed the Declaration philosophy from John Locke, who was quite clear on what he meant by equality. In his *Second Treatise of Government*, Locke writes that equality is a state

wherein all the Power and Jurisdiction is reciprocal, *no one having more than another*: there being nothing more evident, than that Creatures of the same species and rank promiscuously born to all the same advantages of Nature, and the use of the same faculties, should also be *equal one amongst another, without Subordination or Subjection....* [Emphasis added.]

Locke goes on to elaborate what Long calls “equality of authority”:

[Being] all equal and independent, no one ought to harm another in his Life, Health, Liberty or Possessions.... And being furnished with like Faculties, sharing all in one Community of Nature, there cannot be supposed any such *Subordination* among us, that may Authorize us to destroy one another, as if we were made for one another's uses, as the inferior ranks of Creatures are for ours.

Thus if Hillary Clinton, private citizen, cannot legitimately force you and me to buy medical insurance, neither can Hillary Clinton, president of the United States — even if 99.9 percent of the American people support the idea. Morality is not properly determined by majority rule.

Americans have let their freedom slip away because they have failed to exercise simple logic and common sense. They have overlooked the fact that politicians can have no power not possessed by private individuals. They have swallowed the propaganda that all people are created equal, but that some are more equal than others. Americans have become like the subjects who were afraid to tell their emperor he was naked for fear of being thought stupid. And the politicians intent on exploiting us like that arrangement just fine.

Where is the courageous youth who shouts that the emperor — or empress — has no clothes?

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