Who’s to Blame?
by Walter E. Williams

In Federalist Paper 45, James Madison, the father of our Constitution, explains, “The powers delegated by the proposed Constitution to the Federal Government, are few and defined. Those which are to remain in the State Governments are numerous and indefinite. The former will be exercised principally on external objects, as war, peace, negotiation, and foreign commerce; with which last the power of taxation will for the most part be connected.” Other founders gave similar assurances about the limitations that the constitution set on the federal government. If our founders could see today’s federal government, it would be unrecognizable to their vision. In fact, their vision has been turned upon its head, so that the powers of the state governments are “few and defined” and those of the federal government “are numerous and indefinite.”

Who is to blame for a federal government that spends a third of our income, regulates most every aspect of our lives, and has snuffed out the personal liberty envisioned by our founders? It is tempting to blame politicians whom we elect and send to Washington. I shared that view until a luncheon conversation I had with the late Sen. Jesse Helms of North Carolina during the 1980s.

Part of our conversation was about crop subsidies that I had often criticized in my nationally syndicated column. Sen. Helms said that he agreed with me 100 percent. Then he asked me to tell him how could he remain senator from North Carolina and vote against crop subsidies. He said that if he voted against crop subsidies, North Carolinians would run him out of office and elect someone else whom I’d find worse than he.

My conversation with Sen. Helms was an epiphany of sorts: how reasonable is it for us to ask or expect a politician to commit what he deems to be political suicide? A politician’s goal, before all others, is to get elected to and remain in office. The way he accomplishes that is suggested by Henry Louis Mencken’s description of an election: “Government is a broker in pillage, and every election is sort of an advance auction sale of stolen goods.” To the extent Mencken is right our problem is identified. It’s not our politicians who are to blame for our Leviathan government and subsequent loss of liberties. It is the American people.

Government has no resources of its own. Moreover, there is no Tooth Fairy or Santa Claus who gives the government resources. The recognition that government has no resources of its own forces us to recognize that the only way Congress can give one American one dollar is to first, through intimidation, threats, and coercion, confiscate that dollar from some other American through its agents at the taxing authorities. Politicians do precisely what we elect them to office to do: take the rightful property of one American and give it to another.

That is not a complimentary description of our fellow Americans, but it is the reality. If you don’t believe it, imagine there is a senatorial candidate running for office in your state. He tells the people that he plans to heed the Constitution. Therefore, he will not fight to bring his constituents highway construction funds, aid to higher education, farm and business subsidies, welfare, and other federal expenditures not enumerated in the Constitution. He would never be elected. The most tragic thing is that the citizens of the state would be acting wisely, because if he does not bring them the bacon, it does not mean that his constituents will pay lower federal income taxes. All it means is that citizens of some other state will get the money instead. Once legalized theft begins, it pays for everyone to participate. Those not participating will wind up holding the short end of the stick.

If one asks the question: Which way are we headed, tiny steps at a time—toward more liberty or toward greater government control of our lives? The answer is unambiguously more government control of our lives. What can be done? To recover our liberty requires at the minimum putting Washington back to where it was from 1787 to 1920, when it spent only 3 percent of the GDP, except during times of war, as opposed to today’s more than 30 percent of GDP. A constitutional amendment limiting federal spending to, say, 10 percent of the GDP would be a good start.

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