

Why don't we just give it all to the government?



JONAH GOLDBERG asks the question hypothetically, of course, to make the point that much of what we pay in taxes comes back in damage to our freedoms.

CONGRATULATIONS! This is your last week working for the man — at least for this year. The Tax Foundation calculates that Tax Freedom Day for 2010 is April 9, which means that by Friday, Americans will have spent nearly 100 days working just to pay their taxes. If Democrats have their way, Tax Freedom Day will keep getting later and later.

Hold that thought. Imagine for a moment that Tax Freedom Day were Dec. 31. In other words, picture working 365 days a year for the government. Now, the government would “give” you a place to sleep, food to eat and clothes to wear, but all your income would really be Washington’s income to allocate as it saw fit. Some romantics might call this sort of arrangement “socialism” or “communism.” But another perfectly good word for it is “slavery,” or, if you prefer, involuntary servitude.

No one is proposing such an arrangement. But it’s an important point conceptually. A 100 percent tax rate would be tyrannical not just because you have a right to own what you create but because the government would necessarily decide what you can and can’t have. Reasonable people can differ about where a tax rate becomes tyrannical. But any amount of taxation can be unjust if it is used for bad reasons, is applied discriminatorily or is taken without representation.

Individual liberty is far from the only concern, either. The kind of country we want to be is deeply bound up in taxation. The Tax Foundation estimates that some 60 percent of American families already get more from the government than they pay in taxes (and the top 10 percent of earners pay more than 70 percent of the income taxes). If all of President Barack Obama’s plans are enacted, that percentage will increase. We are heading toward being a country where instead of the people deciding how much money the government should have, the government decides how much money the people should have.

Only after they passed ObamaCare did Democrats clarify that this was one of their motives. ObamaCare’s appeal has less to do with saving money — which it won’t — than with spreading the wealth around. Senate Finance Committee Chairman Max Baucus, D-Mont., recently admitted that alleviating the “maldistribution of income in America” from the haves to the have-nots is one of the legislation’s real benefits. Of course, this will fuel the national debt, which has soared on both parties’ watches, choking liberty in another way: We are levying tax obligations for generations to come. Our grandchildren didn’t have much representation in that taxation.

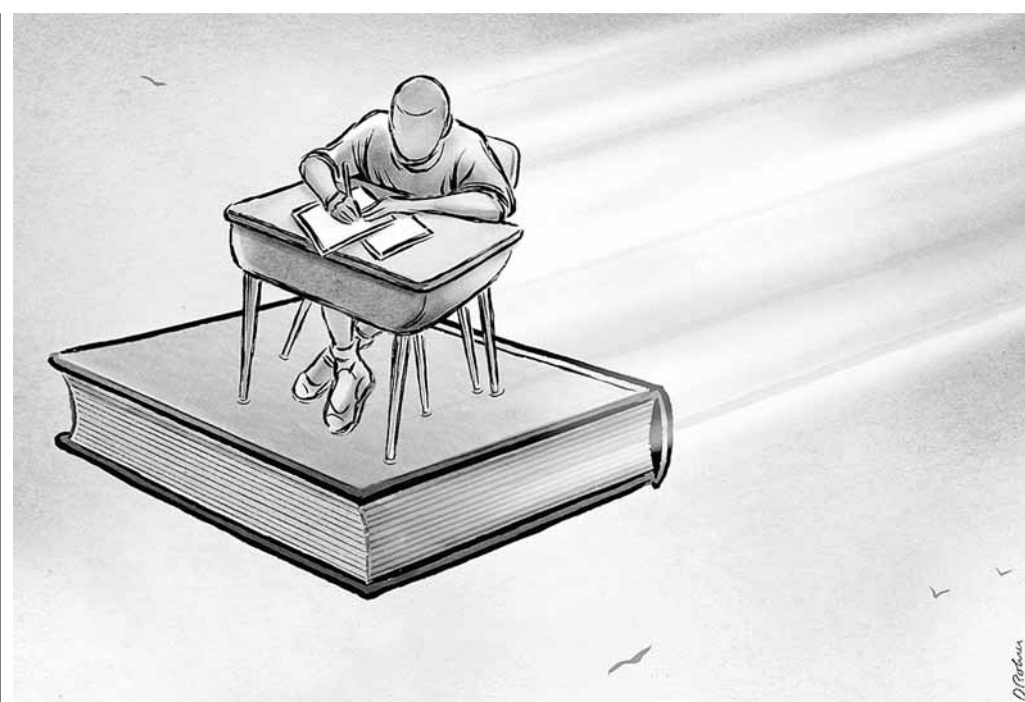
It’s also true that taxes impede growth, and low economic growth curtails the pursuit of happiness for everyone. Democrats are increasingly skeptical about this transcendently obvious point because they have convinced themselves that since government is better than the private sector when it comes to spending money wisely, it only makes sense to take money from the dumb private sector and let the smart government sector decide what to do with it. Well, no matter how dumb America’s wealth creators might be, they’re smart enough to respond to incentives and disincentives. Indeed, since 1950, no matter where their tax rates have been, from as low as 28 percent to as high as 91 percent, the government’s take has held at about 19.5 percent of GDP, suggesting that squeezing taxpayers harder doesn’t necessarily yield more juice.

I have never understood liberalism’s blind spot for liberty when it comes to taxation. A 24-hour waiting period before a teenager can have an abortion is an allegedly grotesque violation of freedom, but a government that takes vast amounts of your money to distribute as it sees fit is “progressive”? The USA Patriot Act, whose threat to privacy was somewhere between entirely theoretical and nonexistent for most, shocked the liberal conscience. But our income tax that requires law-abiding citizens to reveal (and document!) many of their most private decisions to government inspectors is “reasonable.” Yet many liberals even think complaining about this is a sign of right-wing dementia.

Now, under ObamaCare, the IRS is going to branch out into the field of health care, enforcing mandates and collecting fees. Perhaps it’s not entirely paranoid to fear that this will make the IRS’ past intrusions of proctological exactitude even less metaphorical.

I bring this up because many in the Democratic Party and the news media have a hard time understanding what the tea party crowd is talking about when it complains of incipient tyranny and intrusive government. This might be why much of the media keep making up motives for the tea partiers rather than taking them at their word (as when a CNN reporter told viewers that the tea parties were driven by “anti-CNN” passions). Again, reasonable people can disagree with where the line between necessary taxation and injustice lies. But the line exists. Tax Freedom Day is going to come later and later, no matter what. Maybe we should figure out now where on the calendar we should mark down that line.

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Making the case for civic engagement in schools

Local groups fostering growth in STEM curricula

By **KIRSTIN MATTHEWS** and **MAXIE HOLLINGSWORTH**

Gone forever are the days when a high school graduate could go to work on an assembly line and expect to earn a middle-class standard of living. Students who leave high school today without skills and unprepared for further learning are unlikely to ever earn enough to raise a family. They are being sentenced to a lifetime of poverty.

— Tony Wagner, *Making the Grade*, 2002

LAST year, the Texas State Board of Education approved changes to the K-12 science curriculum standards, known as the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills, or TEKS. The revisions go into effect for the 2010–11 school year and include a new requirement for middle and high school students to maintain lab notebooks to record data, observations, graphs and calculations.

While professional development opportunities are available to help teachers prepare for the revisions, educators around the state are scrambling to incorporate the changes, understandably with some trepidation. Elementary teachers, in particular, are in a difficult spot: They generally are not science or curriculum specialists but must now integrate hands-on science instruction into their daily lessons as mandated by the new standards.

The state should be commended for recognizing the need to engage students in more rigorous science learning. Hands-on instruction — particularly inquiry-based — can be a valuable tool to help teachers set up appropriate learning situations for their students. On the other hand, teachers are limited by time, large class sizes, inadequate facilities and equipment, pressures to focus on standardized tests, lack of comfort with science content and even resistance to new teaching strategies. The availability of appropriate resources to support science learning is especially critical for teachers in Houston, where experts estimate that up to 42 percent of ninth-grade students will drop out of high school.

An injection of support from the national level might help change these numbers. In November 2009, President Barack Obama announced the launch of his “Educate to Innovate” campaign to improve K-12 education in science, technology, engineering and math, known collectively as STEM. The campaign involves federal agencies, national corporations, scientists and nonprofits working collaboratively to focus on recruitment, retention and training of teachers; providing summer learning programs for students; and encouraging scientists and engineers to volunteer in classrooms.

The prominence of the campaign’s supporters — NASA Administrator Charles Bolden; Sally Ride, a physicist and the first American woman in space; and Arden Bement, director of the National Science Foundation — underscores the importance of science and

math education to our nation’s future, as well as the significant challenges in education nationwide. U.S. middle and high school students don’t perform well on standardized tests for science and math. And compared with their peers from other industrialized countries, U.S. students lack the critical thinking and reasoning skills needed to apply what they’ve learned in science and math. They scored below 18 and nine other nations respectively on international science and math literacy tests.

In the Houston area, Rice University is working to change the relationship between the STEM and K-12 education communities by increasing contact and access between the two. Teacher training at the Rice University School Mathematics Project and the Elementary Model Science Lab, as well as innovative programs like SciRAVE, build science and math skills and reinforce classroom learning. The Baker Institute for Public Policy sponsors the Civic Scientist Outreach Series, where scientists and engineers from Rice visit area middle and high school classrooms to facilitate hands-on experiments, lead minilectures and share information about their own journeys into the STEM fields. The goal is to give students and teachers an opportunity to interact with scientists and to learn about real-life applications for science and technology. The Civic Scientist Program demystifies science by exposing K-12 teachers and students to STEM experts; helps teachers incorporate high-level science concepts into the classroom; and inspires students to consider careers in science.

Through the Civic Scientist Program, Rice hopes to improve the educational problems facing students in the Houston area, where in 2009 only 58.5 percent of HISD students graduated. Rice provides resource-rich educational experiences that are vital to helping students prepare for college or the work force. The need is real for Houston’s 352,535 K-12 students who may someday work in the health care, energy, engineering and telecommunications industries that dominate the region. The Civic Scientist Program helps change conversations that U.S. students have about their future and makes STEM disciplines more accessible. The core of science education is effective teaching, and educators need an arsenal of tools like the Civic Scientist Program at their disposal, particularly in Houston, where not enough students are prepared to become engineers, scientists and physicians — careers in high demand in the 21st century.

Matthews is a fellow in science and technology policy at the Baker Institute. Her research focuses on the intersection between traditional biomedical research and public policy. Matthews’ current projects include the Baker Institute International Stem Cell Policy Program, the Civic Scientist Lecture Series and policy studies in research and development funding, genomics and climate change. Hollingsworth is the program director for the Office of K-12 Initiatives at Rice University, where she is responsible for coordinating the university’s K-12 educational outreach efforts in the Houston metropolitan area.



After a long drive to corporate disaster, an IPO



GEORGE F. WILL traces U.S. carmakers’ long road to ruin with a tear for the days when General Motors was American capitalism’s most iconic corporation.

THE times truly are out of joint when the most important IPO — initial public offering — of 2010 could come from what was American capitalism’s iconic corporation for most of its 102 years. Andrew Bary, writing in *Barron’s*, says General Motors “may go public in the second half of this year, and its stock market value could top \$50 billion, more than Ford’s \$40 billion.”

This is justice under today’s state capitalism: Ford took on \$23.6 billion in debt to avoid becoming dependent on Washington, whereas GM shed much of its debt by becoming dependent. Washington, Bary explains, turned most of its \$50 billion loan to GM into 60.8 percent ownership, the United Auto Workers got 17.5 percent for forgoing a \$20 billion health care claim against the company, and Canada’s government got an 11.7 percent stake for \$9

billion. Detroit’s long drive down the crumbling road to disaster is chronicled in *Crash Course* by Paul Ingrassia, formerly of *The Wall Street Journal*. It is a story of the hubris of a corporate oligopoly and the myopia of a union monopoly.

When Henry Ford said people could have his cars in any color they wanted as long as it was black, the actual name of the color was, portentously, “Japan black enamel.” But in 1927, GM hired Harley Earl, whose father designed custom cars for Hollywood stars, to head its Art and Color Section, a harbinger of Detroit’s emphasis on cars as “visual entertainment” — Earl’s phrase — rather than on the technological improvements Japanese automakers would come to emphasize.

Enchanted by stabilizer fins on World War II P-38 fighter planes, Harley put tail fins on 1948 Cadillacs. By 1959 the fins were almost

as high as the car’s roof.

But that year an ad showing a Volkswagen Beetle in front of a suburban home asked, “What year car do the Jones drive?”

This, Ingrassia says, “took direct aim at annual styling changes, which lay at the very heart of Detroit’s business model.”

When Lee Iacocca ran Chrysler, it spent \$2 million on gold-plated faucets and other trimmings in the company’s suite at the Waldorf. Even in the late 1980s, GM had segregation by rank in the “salaried men’s restroom” and the “hourly men’s restroom.” Still, the UAW hourly workers flourished.

In 1970, a 67-day strike against GM won, Ingrassia reports, “the company’s 400,000 hourly workers (triple what the Big Three’s combined total would be 40 years later) a 30 percent wage hike over the next three years.” Soon workers could retire at any age with a full pension after 30 years. “If the retiree lived to be 79 or older,” Ingrassia writes, “he or she would spend more years drawing a full pension than actually working.”

Those still working did so under rules so complex that the *table of contents* of the contract was almost 200 pages long. Other autoworkers were unenthralled by such UAW triumphs: In 1986, the UAW abandoned its attempt to unionize Honda’s Marysville, Ohio,

plant by secret ballot. It did not have the votes. Today, unions want “card check” organizing so it can dispense with secret ballots.

By the turn of this century, GM was being kept afloat by its financing arm, GMAC, which was deeply into subprime mortgages. Ingrassia dryly notes: “Some GM dealers in Southern California were taken aback when customers bristled at being asked to fill out a GMAC credit report for a car loan. They hadn’t needed a detailed credit report to get a mortgage from GMAC on their new home.”

Studebaker shut down in 1966, and American Motors was absorbed by Chrysler in 1987. But compassionate government has stopped the Darwinian culling of the herd.

When Washington bailed out Chrysler in the late 1970s, Alan Greenspan, then a Wall Street consultant, said the danger was not that the rescue would fail but that it would work, thereby whetting Washington’s appetite for interventions. The bailout “worked” in that the government made money from it and Chrysler survived to be rescued 30 years later by an administration that, as a wit has said, can imagine the world without the internal combustion engine but without Chrysler.

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