

# The 7 Never-to-be-Forgotten Principles of Government

by Harry Browne

July 1, 2003

It's easy to think sometimes that a new government program, law, or regulation could cure a pressing social problem.

Whether it's a desire to end abortions, keep the wrong people out of the country, make your city drug-free, stop corporate frauds, crack down on criminals, or make health care more accessible and less expensive, you can imagine how the right new law could make everything okay.

But when you get that kind of thought, I hope you'll remember the seven principles that apply to all government programs — not just the ones you oppose.

## The Principles

### 1. Government is force.

Every government program, law, or regulation is a demand that someone do what he doesn't want to do, refrain from doing what he does want to do, or pay for something he doesn't want to pay for. And those demands are backed up by police with guns.

You expect that force to be used only against the guilty. But we can see how the Drug War, the foreign wars, asset forfeiture, the Patriot Act, and other government activities have used force just as often against the innocent — people who have not intruded on anyone else's person or property.

In fact, government force is used more often against the innocent than the guilty, because the guilty make it their business to understand the laws that apply to them and stay clear of them. Meanwhile, the innocent, thinking they've nothing to fear, suddenly find that they've innocently violated laws they never heard of.

### 2. Government is politics.

Whenever you turn over to the government a financial, social, medical, military, or commercial matter, it's automatically transformed into a political issue — to be decided by those with the most political influence. And that will never be you or I.

Politicians don't weigh their votes on the basis of ideology or social good. They think in terms of political power.

### 3. You don't control government.

It's easy to think of the perfect law that will stop the bad guys while leaving the good guys unhindered. But no law will be written the way you have in mind, it won't be administered the way you have in mind, and it won't be adjudicated the way you have in mind.

Your ideal law will be written by politicians for political purposes, administered by bureaucrats for political purposes, and adjudicated by judges appointed for political purposes. So don't be surprised if the new law turns out to do exactly the opposite of what you thought you were supporting.

### 4. Every government program will be more expensive and more expansive than anything you had in mind when you proposed it. It will be applied in all sorts of ways you never dreamed of.

When Medicare was initially passed in 1965, the politicians projected its cost in 1992 to be \$3 billion — which is equivalent to \$12 billion when adjusted for inflation to 1992 dollars. The actual cost in 1992 was \$110 billion — nine times as much.

And when Medicare was enacted, Section 1801 of the original law specifically prohibited any bureaucratic interference with the practice of medicine. Today not one word of that protection still applies. The federal government owns the health-care industry lock, stock, and barrel.

The new program you support will eventually include all sorts of powers and privileges you can't even imagine right now.

### 5. Power will always be misused. Give good people the power to do good and that power eventually will be in the hands of bad people to do bad.

As Michael Cloud has pointed out, "The problem isn't the abuse of power; it's the power to abuse." Give politicians power and it certainly will be abused eventually — if not by today's politicians, then by their successors.

As P.J. O'Rourke said, "Giving money and power to politicians is like giving whiskey and car keys to teenage boys."

### 6. Government doesn't work.

Because government is force, because government programs are designed to enrich the politically powerful, because you can't control government and make it do what's right, because every new government program soon wanders from its original purpose, and because politicians eventually misuse the power you give them, it is inevitable that no government program will deliver on the promises the politicians make for it.

For years, I've asked listeners during radio interviews to name a government program that has actually delivered on its promises, and no one has been able to do so.

If you think there's a successful government program, you probably don't know how much it actually costs, aren't aware of all its destructive side-effects, have no idea how easily and inexpensively such a thing could be done outside of government, and/or are basing your view of its success on political propaganda.

It doesn't matter whether a program is supposed to do something you want or something you don't want, whether the program is something you consider a proper function of government or something beyond its limits. It won't work. Government programs always wind up disappointing you.

## 7. Government must be subject to absolute limits.

Because politicians have every incentive to expand government, and with it their power, there must be absolute limits on government.

The Constitution provides the obvious limits we must reimpose upon the federal government. Until the Constitution is enforced, we have no hope of containing the federal government.

The present system of unlimited power is like giving a drunken stranger a set of signed, blank checks on your bank account. You are reduced to relying on the honesty and integrity of people you don't even know — and they abuse that trust again and again.

Whether you think government should be bigger or smaller than the limits specified in the Constitution, the first step is to restore absolute limits, and then — if you like — work to change those limits to ones that would be more to your liking.

## Questions

So the next time you're tempted to think that some government program is just what this country needs, ask yourself these questions:

Do I really want to use force to make this happen? Do I have any idea how many families may be destroyed by giving the government another tool to be enforced with fines and prison terms?

Do I really believe that George Bush, Teddy Kennedy, Hillary Clinton, and Trent Lott will have my best interests at heart when they fashion this new program or law?

Why should I believe supporting this program will lead to exactly the solution I believe is right — when I have no way to control the outcome?

Do I really think the politicians won't expand the scope and cost of this program far beyond what they're talking about today?

Do I really want to give politicians this kind of power — knowing that some day the politicians and party I don't like will have it at their disposal?

Why in the world should I think this government program will work any better than any government program of the past?

How can I hope to bring about small, limited government when I'm suggesting a new government program that will take us further away from the Constitution?

## Conclusion

If you really want to cure a pressing social problem, take steps outside the realm of government. If you don't see how you can convince people to help you succeed in a non-governmental endeavor, how can you expect to control politicians who care nothing for your desires?

And if you really want to make a noticeable difference, if you really want to improve life, do something for yourself or your family today. That's where you have real control, that's where you don't need to rely on politicians — or anyone else — and you can make sure the results are as you intend.