

Campaign for Liberty

Button, Button

The 1980s revival of the *Twilight Zone* series featured an episode entitled "Button, Button," based on a short story by sci-fi veteran Richard Matheson (*I Am Legend, What Dreams May Come*). In the story, a strange package arrives at the small apartment of Mr. and Mrs. Lewis, who appear to be about one bill away from relocating to a matching set of cardboard boxes. Mrs. Lewis opens the package and discovers that it contains a simple wooden box with a clear plastic lid overtop a large red button (the type of contraption teens might build in a high school woodshop class). Also included is a note advising that someone will be in touch to explain everything.

Later that afternoon, as promised, a mysterious, black-clad gentleman arrives at the apartment and presents Mrs. Lewis with an offer that proves both tempting and frightening. He informs her that she and her husband have two options with regard to the box:

1. Don't push the button. The man will come back to reclaim the box. No gain, no loss. The end.
2. Push the button, after which two things will happen: "Someone whom you do not know will die. And afterward you will receive \$200,000, tax-free."

The stranger then leaves to let the bewildered Mrs. Lewis think over her options.

That night, when Mr. Lewis comes home, the couple argue over whether the offer is real, and, if so, what to do about it. Mr. Lewis decides that it would be unconscionable to press the button, as it would result in murder. His wife disagrees; she wants to go for it. After all, what is the death of someone they don't know? People die all the time, don't they? "What if it was some old Chinese peasant, or someone with cancer?" she argues. "And what if it's someone's newborn baby?" her husband counters.

After a sleepless night and more arguing, Mrs. Lewis decides that she is owed this opportunity. She opens the box, looking as if she half expects it to bite her, and quickly presses the button. Nothing dramatic or ominous happens... at least not immediately. Later that afternoon, however, the mysterious man in black returns. He presents the Lewises with a briefcase full of cash, and reclaims his button box. Nervously puffing away on a cigarette, Mrs.

Lewis asks if someone... "well, you know... " She's unable to bring herself to say the word "died". "Of course," the man replies matter-of-factly. Then, when she asks him what will happen next, he looks into her eyes and says: "The button unit will be reprogrammed and offered to someone else, the same terms and conditions...I can assure you it will be offered to someone whom you don't know."

Hardly a day passes when I don't spend at least some time wondering how it is that America has gone from being a constitutional republic to more of a 'people's republic,' and how much longer I'll be able to discuss such questions in public before some heavily-armed civil servants kick my door in and haul me off to be shocked or waterboarded into correct thinking. And in considering these issues, I am convinced, now more than ever, that the premise of that old Twilight Zone episode speaks forcibly to the central aspect of our current problem.

It's all about who we don't know.

Think about it this way:

How many of the socialists that you see clamoring for more government programs and intervention on TV would, if offered the chance, walk into an average American home (assuming no 2nd Amendment deterrent, of course), raid all of the available wallets and purses in that home, and then go donate the money they confiscate to some charity or politically-correct cause? Can you see Barack Obama, Hillary Clinton or Barbara Boxer walking into someone's living room and announcing: "We're here to tell you what's best for you and your family. We'll decide what school your children will attend and what they'll be taught there. We'll decide what doctors you can see, what medications you can have, and whether or not you can try alternative treatments. We'll decide what you can eat and how much of it you can have. We'll decide what causes you will support with your money and how much you'll give. We'll decide how you should fit into society and which of your personal beliefs are a threat to society and should be suppressed. We'll decide what privileges you will be allowed. And, oh, by the way, we're also going to force you to maintain the system that will ensure that you abide by our directives. Any attempt to deviate from said directives will result in serious consequences."

Now, granted, there are people who would do things like this if they thought they could get by with it. By and large, however, most people would not. Why? Because confrontations such as what I've described above are personal. When you enter someone's home, or otherwise spend time with them, you can attach a name and a face to them. You can see where and how they live, what difficulties they struggle with, what is dear to them, what their strengths and weaknesses are, what hopes and dreams they may have. Under such circumstances, they are individuals, and they are real to you as individuals. You may think that you know better than they do, but you're not likely to tell them that, and you're even less likely to try forcing your views on them.

But while this is generally the rule in individual situations, things change completely come election day, when we find ourselves in the voting booth and that curtain swings shut behind us.

Consider an imaginary ballot, and a couple of typical voters:

Option 1 asks Joe Voter whether he favors raising the local sales tax to help pay for a new sports arena. What it's also asking, albeit in a more subtle form, is whether Joe thinks that his friends and neighbors should have to sacrifice a little more every time they buy anything, so that Joe can get what he wants. But Joe never thinks of it this way. Bob, his next door neighbor, won't pay the tax; "the city" will. Conveniently, "the city" has no distinct identity. It has no face. Joe doesn't know "the city," so he feels no guilt in voting for Option 1 and raising Bob's taxes. Besides, the old arena is a real eyesore; a new one would make Joe feel as if he lived in a more upscale community.

In the booth next to Joe, Barbara reads over Option 2, which asks whether the state's blue laws should remain in effect, prohibiting the sale of general merchandise prior to 1:30 pm on Sundays. Barbara supports Option 2 because she hates commercialism in general and thinks that people need to slow down more. A day with less

shopping and more family time is just what the doctor ordered, for everyone. Besides, Barbara's husband owns a car dealership, and if the other dealers were allowed to be open all day on Sunday, then her husband would either have to lose business to them or else open earlier than he would prefer. Thus Barbara considers a vote to retain her state's blue laws a boon for family values and a blow to greed commercialism. It's "what's best" for everyone.

We wear such amazingly effective political blinders, don't we? It's always "the city," "the county," "the state," or "the country," that pays for what we want and heels to our demands. Never Bob the struggling family man. Never Jill the single mom. Never anyone we know. Never anyone we have to explain ourselves to.

Such is the cold, impersonal ugliness of statism, and the subtle, de-humanizing way in which it works itself into our consciousness. Statists never stop to think about the individuals they harm because, politically speaking, individuals either don't matter to them or else escape their notice. They consider themselves "big picture" people. They see only society itself, broken down into various competing subgroups to be crunched and graphed like so many numbers ("digital individuals," if you will). Civilization is their political blackboard, filled with social equations waiting to be brought into utopian balance. Statists never see Bob or Jill having to struggle harder to make ends meet because of some new tax. What they see is how nice a brand new stadium would look and how it might "advance the community as a whole." The tax Bob and Jill are forced to pay is just their "fair share" of "doing what's right for the community," and if Bob and Jill object to it, they're being "selfish" and "short-sighted." Statists never see Rick from down the street being denied a city contract and an opportunity to expand his business simply because he is not the right color or gender. Instead, what they see is someone who is the right color or gender being given that contract in order to "right past wrongs" done to a particular group, and Rick is assigned a portion of the blame for those wrongs, even though he may never have hurt, discriminated against, or otherwise "wronged" anyone in his life. Statists never see those who are turned down for operations, denied treatments, or else suffer and/or die while waiting for treatment while bureaucrats sedately dot their I's and cross their T's in the hubs of their vast, tax-based healthcare bureaucracies. All they can see is that they're extending aid to yet another faceless group: "the unfortunate."

How easily we put on those robes and crowns. How casually we wield the scepters of little gods, passing out life and death, determining who is worthy of what and how much, deciding what's right on the most intimate levels for people we don't even know. We play our own version of the button game, day after day.

Press the button, get a guilt-free program. Some "wealthy" person, some privileged "winner of life's lottery" will be the one to pay for it, right? Perhaps not, but what does that matter in the greater scheme of things? Press the button, get guilt-free social justice. Praise God, someone's finally gonna pay! Who? Who cares? That's beside the point, right? Press the button, get guilt-free regulation. After all, other people don't always know what's best for them, but we always know, don't we? And best of all, when you regulate someone's life from the privacy of the voting booth or the distance of the council room, you don't have to put up with insolent questions like: "What right do you have to tell me how to live?" And you don't have to get your hands dirty, either. Government agencies, police departments, and courts will do all the dirty work: hounding people, fining them, running them out of business, prosecuting them, jailing them, taking their children from them, and sometimes killing them. Most of the time, you'll never even have to hear about it.

And so down the road we go, playing "button, button" with one another, always hoping to get something from someone we don't know, or forcing them to live by the dictates of our conscience — never thinking that the button box will be reset and handed to someone who doesn't know us, giving them their own chance to play God with us and the things we hold most dear.

Folks, we can launch all of the ad campaigns we want, hire the most riveting speakers we can find, and money-bomb the daylights out of the Ron Paul's and Peter Schiff's of the world, and we will still lose our freedoms until and unless we can make our fellow citizens see "the city," "the county," "the state," and "the country" as their friends, neighbors and co-workers. We must make them see that their acts of interference in the lives of others forge precedents by which those others are empowered to interfere in their lives. We must bring the cold,

impersonal, ugly consequences of statism home in the most personal ways possible. We must make people see the button game for what it is, make them realize that when they step into the voting booth they're making decisions that affect real people, and not always for the better. For starters, try getting those you know to ask themselves some of the following questions the next time they go to cast a vote:

1. Do I have the right — personally — to do what I'm about to ask government to do on my behalf? If not, how can I give my representatives power that I don't even possess myself?
2. Would I want someone else to make this sort of decision for me?
3. Is getting my way on this issue worth having someone fined? Is it worth them losing their job? Is it worth sending them to prison? Would it still be worth it if I had to fine them, fire them, or imprison them myself? If not, why would I ask anyone else to do what I am not willing to do myself?
4. What precedent am I setting here? Would I want this sort of power in the hands of the politician or political group I fear the most? Does anyone out there think of me or the politicians and groups I support in that same way already?
5. If a program is supposed to give, what must it first take? From whom will it take it? Could I justify this if I had to face the person I'm voting to take it from?
6. If a program is supposed to provide an opportunity for someone, must it first take that opportunity from someone else? Could I justify taking it if I had to face the affected person?
7. If my community really wants to accomplish something, why must it forcefully collect money for it via taxation? Why can't sufficient funds be raised privately, through voluntary means?

Some may argue that we shouldn't "get personal" when it comes to politics, but what they fail to appreciate is that politics is already fundamentally personal. It's impossible to interfere with the lives of individuals and not affect them personally. If we can make America see this, we can begin to turn the tide, but if not, then the war is lost already, and we're all just sitting around waiting for our next turn with the button box... and dreading the idea of who may get it after us.

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www.CampaignForLiberty.com

www.YoungAmericansForLiberty.org

"Educate and inform the whole mass of the people...

They are the only sure reliance for the preservation of our liberty."

Thomas Jefferson

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