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Comment on the Commentary of the Day

by
Donald J. Boudreaux
Chairman, Department of Economics
George Mason University
dboudrea@gmu.edu
http://www.cafehayek.com

Disclaimer: The following "Letters to the Editor" were sent to the respective publications on the dates indicated. Some were printed but many were not. The original articles that are being commented on may or may not be available on the internet and may require registration or subscription to access if they are. Some of the original articles are syndicated and therefore may have appeared in other publications also.

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29 January 2011

Editor, Cleveland Plain Dealer

Dear Editor:

James Banner objects to a proposed constitutional amendment to allow any legislation enacted by Uncle Sam to be "dis-enacted" by a vote of 2/3ds or more of state legislatures ("An amendment rooted in past failures," Jan. 30). Mr. Banner argues that this amendment would give "a minority of Americans another means of preventing the majority from governing."

The case isn't so clear. Suppose that each of the 535 members of Congress is elected to office by a razor-thin majority of a mere 51 percent of the votes in his or her district or state. 49 percent of American voters would then be represented on Capitol Hill by persons they voted against. Now suppose that this Congress enacts a statute by the barest majority: 51 'yea' votes in the Senate and 218 'yea' votes in the House. The result is a statute that is enacted with the favorable votes of representatives of only a tad more than 25 percent of Americans. In this case, a sizeable majority (nearly 75 percent) of us are forced to follow rules imposed by a minority of us.

The proposed amendment might or might not be a bad idea. But one cannot make a sensible assessment of it by naively presuming that all, or even most, legislation approved by Congress - even if signed by the President - invariably reflects the wishes of a majority of Americans.

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29 January 2011

Editor, Chicago Tribune

Dear Editor:

You justifiably celebrate the continued increase in the safety of air travel ("Safe skies," Jan. 29). Airlines' safety record is even more impressive when compared to the principal means of long-distance commercial passenger travel a century ago: railroads.

In every year from 1891 through 1926, at least 143 passengers were killed annually in railroad accidents. The average yearly number of railroad-passenger deaths for these 36 years is 281 persons. Compare these fatality figures from railroads of a century ago to commercial airline travel today: In 2007, 2008, and 2010 not a single person was killed in a U.S. commercial airline accident. And since 1970, an average of only 52 persons have died annually in the U.S. as a result of commercial airline accidents. [Historical Statistics of the United States: 1789-1945, Series K 82-93.-RAILROADS-EMPLOYMENT AND WAGES, AND RAILWAY ACCIDENTS AND FATALITIES: 1890 TO 1945]

The plain fact is that flying is not only fast, it's marvelously safe.

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28 January 2011

Editor, Financial Times

Dear Sir or Madam:

The headline of your lead story on India reads "Strong growth yet to improve lives of the poor" (Jan. 27). My initial reaction, upon seeing that headline, was "Lack of growth hasn't done much to improve lives of the poor either."

My reaction was strengthened when I read the full article, which reports on still-rampant corruption, "stubbornly high inflation," "an often-stifling bureaucracy," "restrictions on FDI," and "legislation hostile to foreign capital and profitmaking."

My reaction was further fortified by another story on India, appearing on the very same page, that reports "Indian governments have long spurned any talk of opening the food retailing sector to foreign companies" ("Dramatic food price rises may help open doors to foreigners," Jan. 27).

Considering that retailers such as Wal-Mart and Tesco have dramatically reduced retail food prices wherever they operate - and that stifling bureaucracy, capital controls, and inflation are products, not of free markets and economic growth, but, rather, of government intervention - it's no mystery why the economic growth that some Indians now enjoy is being denied to India's poor.

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28 January 2010

Editor, The New York Times
620 Eighth Avenue
New York, NY 10018

To the Editor:

Peter Samton says that GOP efforts to eliminate the National Endowments for the Arts and the Humanities, as well as the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, expose that party's "ignorance in matters cultural" (Letters, Jan. 28).

Suppose a radical-right Congress manages to create a National Endowment for Religions as well as a Corporation for Public Worship. Democrats would certainly - and rightly - work to eliminate such programs on grounds that these are dangerous intrusions by government into matters that government has no business meddling in, as well as an unconstitutional use of taxpayer funds. And surely Democrats would vigorously - and, again, rightly - point out that their opposition to these government programs does not imply that Democrats oppose religion or that they are "ignorant in matters spiritual."

Why are GOP efforts to get government out of the arts any different? To object to Uncle Sam subsidizing the arts - particularly when there's no constitutional provision authorizing such funding - hardly implies that one is a knuckle-dragging oaf.

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27 January 2011

Editor, Washington Post
1150 15th St., NW
Washington, DC 20071

Dear Editor:

E.J. Dionne interprets Pres. Obama's State of the Union summons for government to "invest" more in "our free-enterprise system" as the president telling Americans that "without smart and active government, China will leave us in the dust" ("Obama finds a new angle to reach old goals," Jan. 27).

This message is surely the one that Mr. Obama meant to convey. But the message is misleading, based as it is on the popular fallacies that countries are like corporations, and that international trade is akin to a sporting event in which there are winners and losers.

As explained by a Nobel-laureate economist who wrote an entire book denouncing the notion that when countries trade with each other they compete against each other, "One of the most popular enduring misconceptions of practical men is that countries are in competition with each other in the same way that companies in the same business are in competition.... [I]nternational trade is not about competition, it is about mutually beneficial exchange."

Are these the words of "conservative" economist Milton Friedman? No. F.A. Hayek? Again, no. They are the words of arch-"Progressive" Paul Krugman. [Paul Krugman, "What Do Undergrads Need to Know about Trade?" American Economic Review, May 1993; reprinted in Paul Krugman, Pop Internationalism (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), pp. 117-125. The quotation in the letter is on page 120.]

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27 January 2010

Editor, The New York Times
620 Eighth Avenue
New York, NY 10018

To the Editor:

On your Opinion-page site today you write that "George Clooney is just getting over a case of malaria contracted in Sudan. Now he and Nicholas Kristof will answer reader questions about malaria and how to stop it."

I'm just getting over a case of the shingles. When journalist Kristof and actor Clooney finish sharing their expertise on malaria - and what qualifies one as an expert on any disease and its elimination better than actually contracting that disease? - can I join Mr. Kristof on his blog to answer reader questions about shingles and how to stop it?

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26 January 2011

Friends,

In the Christian Science Monitor I discuss Pres. Obama's recent adoption of a more pro-business stance: http://www.csmonitor.com/Commentary/Opinion/2011/0126/State-of-the-Union-shows-Obama-is-now-pro-business.-He-should-be-pro-growth

I thank GMU econ major Liya Palagashvili for critical feedback.

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25 January 2011

Mr. or Ms. Americafirst

Dear Sir or Madam:

You accuse me of "treason" to America. My offense? Encouraging Uncle Sam not to tax or to otherwise obstruct Americans who wish to trade with Chinese producers on terms that these Americans find attractive.

You argue that "China is a communist dictatorship and so is advantaged by its subsidies and slave labor to out-compete democracies to steal world markets. American businesses and workers can not compete against this."

So you apparently believe that communism – or, at least, dictatorship – is a form of economic organization superior to capitalism. I have some questions for you.

Why has China's share of global export markets increased only AFTER that country's liberalization began in the late 1970s? Because Mao was far more communist and dictatorial than was Deng and his successors, shouldn't China under Mao have been an even more potent global economic juggernaut than is China today?

Why are Cuba and North Korea not gobbling up world markets, "stealing" American jobs, and "threatening America's very survival"?

Why is Hong Kong - which has a robust free-market economy, and still uses its own currency - continuing to grow?

Finally, you somewhat inconsistently list "high taxes" and "cumbersome regulations" as causes of America's alleged inability to compete against the Chinese. But is not slavery (which you - wrongly - allege to exist in China) a huge tax upon workers, discouraging them from producing efficiently? Is not communism itself a high tax on productive individual efforts – on the efforts of entrepreneurs, managers, and workers – as well as an unmatched font of "cumbersome regulations"?

In short, why do you presume that China's economic success springs from its remaining vestiges of communism rather than from its increasing economic liberalization? And why do you presume that taxes and regulations promote economic growth in China while (save for high tariffs) similar, often weaker, state intrusions promote economic decline in America?

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25 January 2010

Editor, The New York Times
620 Eighth Avenue
New York, NY 10018

To the Editor:

Objecting to efforts by 'the party of No' to repeal Obamacare, you ask "What Comes After No?" (Jan. 25).

I have no idea how GOP politicians will answer your question. But I have a good idea of how they SHOULD answer it. They should say to the American people, "Yes, each of you is responsible for your own health-care choices. Yes, each of you has different circumstances, preferences, and tolerances for risk that are inevitably ignored by government intrusion into health-care markets.

"Yes, we understand that each of you would like to get all of your health-care for free, but reality won't cooperate; someone must pay for it. So, yes, we understand that a policy of forcing A to pay for B's health care and forcing B to pay for A's - while it might fool A and B into thinking that their health-care is free - only encourages both A and B to overspend on health-care. Yes, one result is unnecessarily high health-care costs.

"Yes, we understand that any collectivized system of health-care provision and financing unavoidably involves government bureaucrats allocating many health-care dollars according to their whims, according to the social status of patients, or according to some arbitrary criteria that satisfies no one.

"Most importantly, yes, the government will step aside to let each of you make your own choices, and to let entrepreneurs experiment creatively and competitively with different ways of supplying and financing health-care.

"No, the result won't be unlimited health-care for anyone. But, yes, it will be more, better, and less costly health-care for everyone. Oh - and, yes, America will also be a freer society."

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24 January 2010

Editor, The New York Times
620 Eighth Avenue
New York, NY 10018

To the Editor:

Paul Krugman claims that "we'd have more jobs if we exported more and imported less" ("The Competition Myth," Jan. 24).

Mr. Krugman forgets that the more we import the more we either export or receive as investments from foreigners: foreigners don't ship valuable imports to us in exchange for dollars because these foreigners wish to horde tiny monochrome portraits of dead American statesmen.

And consider that the Bureau of Economic Analysis reports that 55.2 percent of U.S. imports in 2010 were either industrial supplies or capital goods. [http://1.bp.blogspot.com/_otfwl2zc6Qc/TQWl8UsaCuI/AAAAAAAAOuA/LkdxeTbfABI/s1600/imports.jpg] That is, well over half of U.S. imports last year were INPUTS used to produce American-made outputs. Put differently, 55.2 percent of American imports in 2010 were used by American workers to produce American outputs.

Clearly, it's too simplistic to assert that reducing imports would create more jobs in America.

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24 January 2011

Editor, Washington Post
1150 15th St., NW
Washington, DC 20071

Dear Editor:

Usually sure-footed, Robert Samuelson stumbles when it comes to U.S. trade with China. In "China's new world order demands stronger U.S. response" (Jan. 24), he writes that Beijing's policy of subsidizing exporters harms America because it "transfers American jobs" to China.

While these subsidies harm the Chinese people, they no more harm Americans than would the invention of a dirt-cheap miracle pill that cures all ailments in everyone under the age of 90.

The invention of such a pill, of course, would 'harm' health-care workers. And it would "transfer jobs" in the same way that subsidized products from China "transfer jobs" - namely, to other productive uses IN AMERICA. By enabling people worldwide to satisfy all health-care needs using almost no labor, this pill would release American workers from health-care industries, making them available to produce other goods and services that would otherwise be too costly to produce.

Subsidized Chinese exports have exactly the same effect in America as would the invention of this pill.

Unless Mr. Samuelson believes that the invention of such a pill would harm Americans over the long run, he should quit worrying that Americans are harmed by Chinese export subsidies.