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Doug Bandow: A liberty-loving Christmas wish list

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I don't expect very much from Santa Claus. He's disappointed me over the years. So this year I'm trying to be realistic. I have just a few simple requests.

Top of my list would be for Americans to stop confusing politics with morality, law with ethics. Government is to protect us in the exercise of our rights, which stem from being independent moral agents created in the image of God. Politics should not devolve into a crusade focused on intrapersonal morality – that is, attempting to make other people better. It always seems easier to fix other people than ourselves, but Jesus warned us to take the log out of our own eyes before trying to remove the splinter from the eyes of others.

Second, I wish the Great Gift-Giver would stop any businessman who praises the wonders of free enterprise from ever asking for a special subsidy, bail out, tax preference, regulatory advantage, or other government privilege. When I worked as a special assistant to President Ronald Reagan, I heard many business visitors praise the wonders of capitalism but then relate, sadly, how his or her industry and especially company had a special need for just a little government help. Of course all hoped that I would resist outrageous efforts by their competitors to secure unfair advantages.

Wish No. 3 is that people stop using language to foreclose debate. Consider foreign “aid,” through which Washington has underwritten authoritarian, collectivist and incompetent regimes, reinforcing failure and discouraging reform. Then there is President Barack Obama's Affordable Care Act, which is eliminating inexpensive health insurance options, dramatically pushing up premiums for the young and healthy and reinforcing the third-party payment system which has made American medical care so expensive.

Fourth, Santa, please stop people from confusing the First Amendment with free expression. The country has gone agog over the “reality” television show “Duck Dynasty” and the comments of one of the characters, Phil Robertson. The First Amendment protects against government suppression of speech. It does not prevent you from refusing to associate with me if you don't like what I said.

A separate wish, but highlighted by the “Duck Dynasty” imbroglio, is that people would stop turning every little controversy into a matter of high moral outrage. Why should anyone get excited about what someone on a silly television show says off the set? Life would be better if we generally tolerated the opinions and actions of others, instead of tried to drive everyone with whom we disagree from the public square.

Wish No. 6 concerns “reality” TV. Santa, please stop people from calling it “reality.” As soon as the cameras switch on, there is no more reality.

My next wish is far bigger. I want people to stop viewing government as the institution through which they are entitled to live at everyone else's expense. Today, many people confuse Uncle Sam with Santa Claus, except they believe every day in Washington is Christmas. The result is a \$17.2 trillion national debt, endless deficits, \$100 trillion in unfunded Social Security and Medicare liabilities, billions in corporate welfare, a bloated military that defends the rest of the world rather than America and social programs that have become a vast soup line for the middle class.

Wish No. 8 is that people who blab about liberty actually support liberty – for everyone. Conservatives routinely talk about freedom, yet many of them seek to impose their morality on others. Liberals love to call themselves “pro-choice” – but only when it comes to human reproduction. How about getting people to support freedom for all, Santa?

Next, could Santa stop members of the bipartisan war party from calling their opponents isolationists? Today “isolationism” means you don't believe the U.S. should be perpetually at war, and patriotic young Americans should die bombing, invading and occupying other nations. In fact, stable peace, not perpetual war, should be the American government's objective.

My 10th, and last, gift suggestion, Santa, is that you restore civility to America's political debate. I've been here a long time, and the climate is ugly and unpleasant. Of course, it's important not to pine for some nonexistent past ideal. Still, today the hostility is pervasive, with politics becoming an ugly red-team-blue team contest in which the objective is to demonize one's opponent.

My track record with Santa isn't particularly good, so I'm not all that optimistic about getting all these presents under my tree. But I'm not asking for the impossible! Come on, Santa, grant at least a couple of my fondest desires.