

Untangling the web of government and taxation

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Over the weekend, I had a heated debate with a friend about government and taxation. When we first met nearly a decade ago, she was a libertarian, a staunch believer that less government is better, and in the practice of “live and let live.” Not such a bad motto to adhere to, I must admit.

During the last several years, however, she has changed her political stance from libertarian to full anarchist, declaring our government to be totally corrupt and that it has enslaved her by forcing her to pay taxes. This change in tune came as a big surprise, since now that it has come time for her to pay taxes, she is adamantly opposed to doing so, even though she went to publicly funded schools during her formative years and for her undergraduate studies, received low-interest federal loans for her master’s degree, and one of her parents and a sibling both work as civil servants.

Her viewpoint, though, is not isolated. As a matter of fact, albeit stating the obvious, many Americans are opposed to taxation, saying that it is not only wrong but unconstitutional. (Certainly, income tax is constitutional since ratification of the 16th amendment in 1913.)

But with so many taxes — income tax, property tax, sales tax, gas tax, state tax, etc. — it is easy to feel downtrodden, abused by our government. After all, logically speaking, what we work so hard for on a daily basis should be ours to spend, and whatever we want to contribute should be our choice, not siphoned out of our paychecks by the government. Unfortunately, what we want for our society and what we are willing to give appear to be two different things.

It is tough to say where this country would be if taxation and government didn’t exist. Many contend we would be better off, but those who gripe the most seem to overlook how many public services and programs they use. The blatant hypocrisy is overwhelming.

While they cry “Don’t tread on me,” they demand that our country be free from terrorism, that we have an efficient and prudent justice system, that criminals be locked away, that education be accessible to all citizens, that our streets, parks, beaches, air and oceans be clean, that our food be safe to eat and products be safe to use, that we have some benefits should we lose our jobs and so on. But come time to pay for all of these services, the attitude is that we are on the verge of becoming a socialist country.

Admittedly, though, government and its tax programs are imperfect — from negligence to malfeasances, that which was intended for good can go bad. For instance, there are billions of dollars in taxpayer subsidies that are more than questionable. A 2007 analytical report by the Cato Institute, a public policy research organization based in

Washington, D.C., stated that the federal government spent more than \$92 billion in direct and indirect subsidies to businesses and private-sector corporate entities in 2006. “Boeing, Xerox, IBM, Motorola, Dow Chemical, General Electric, and others have received millions in taxpayer-funded benefits through programs like the Advanced Technology Program and the Export-Import Bank. In addition, the federal crop subsidy programs continue to fund the wealthiest farmers,” it said.

So the truth of the matter is, government exists and there is no escaping that. We will all have to continue to pay taxes no matter how hard we fight against it and no matter how much we disagree with many of the social services funded by them. There is some good that comes from taxation, and there is some obvious waste and wrongdoing for which we should hold our elected officials accountable and demand change. But by continuing to oversimplify complicated subjects, such as taxation, we choose to ignore difficult issues and further delay untangling the web that leads to a truly progressive and individually responsible country we seem to desire so much.