Indiana: Independent in its way

Leo Morris

July 6, 2021

Once again, the internet comes through with another silly list that is fun to argue about precisely because it is pointless to do so.

Indiana, we are told by the website WalletHub, is the sixth-worst state in the union for the independence of its citizens, better only than the awful quintet of Louisiana, Kentucky, Mississippi, South Carolina and Alaska. Using a set of metrics including the state's dependence on federal money, individuals' bad habits (such as opioid abuse and social media addiction) and the rates of bankruptcy and foreclosure, the site says we Hoosiers are just not a self-sufficient lot.

Utah, the same survey said, is the most self-sufficient state, which struck me as odd. Just this morning, that state's governor was on TV, boasting to a smarmy news reader about how proud she was of the state's COVID-rules compliance and long-range plan to fight climate change. That sounds like sucking up both to Washington and the whole world at the same time.

Outraged on behalf of my beloved Hoosier State, I went looking for other rankings.

According to a story on www.cheatsheet.com, which considers only the percentage of a state's general revenue that comes from the federal government, North Dakota is the most independent state at 16.8%. Indiana doesn't do so well on that list, either, ranking 10th-worst at 38%. Perhaps Gov. Eric Holcomb will keep that in mind the next time he's inclined to gripe about federal interference. Strings, Governor, strings.

At thetoptens.com, a different criterion is used: How would a state do if cut off from the rest of the country? Texas, with a robust economy, diverse and energetic population and a National Guard that could defeat many countries' armies, came out on top followed closely by California and New York.

Makes sense. Bigger is better, now matter how much their current politics might be screwed up.

Both intrigued and puzzled, I then sought the ranking of states on libertarianism, which seems to me would be the guiding philosophy of an autarky.

The Cato Institute says the most libertarian state, based on the degree of personal and economic freedom its citizens enjoy, is Florida, followed by New Hampshire and — hooray for us! — Indiana. On the Mises Institute list, Florida and New Hampshire are first and second, but Indiana falls to 10th, still not bad.

How can Indiana be both one of the least independent states and one of the most libertarian?

Because, remember — silly and pointless. Self-reliance is, by definition, something possessed by or lacking in individuals, not a quality that can easily be applied in the aggregate to a whole people.

And it's a state of mind. Most of the things that give most of us a sense of independence are, ironically, things that also connect us to others, such as our cars and the ubiquitous smart phone. Because my parents had to buy so much on credit, I feel naked without a certain amount of cash in my pocket, never mind that my debit card is almost universally accepted.

But what if we were suddenly cut off from everybody like, well, like Texas or California adrift from the union?

My brother has the right idea. He has several weeks' worth of water and emergency food supplies laid in, and he'd probably lose his mind if somebody spirited it away.

The Federal Emergency Management Agency recommends we all have at least a three-day disaster kit at home, including food and water and everything from a flashlight and battery-operated radio to a first-aid kit and garbage bags. How many of us do? How about an emergency kit for the car in case it breaks down in the middle of nowhere in the middle of winter?

Show me that list — of who is emergency ready and who isn't — and I'll tell you whether the state is "independent" or not, silly though it may be.

And remember, there is a fine line between "self-reliant" and "self-defeating." In other words, if I may refer to an old "Twilight Zone" episode, if you don't have a fallout shelter, you really ought to be friends with a neighbor who does.