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# Tyler Morning Telegraph

## Good intentions are not enough

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It's important to remember a basic principle: Results matter. Good intentions are nice, but they're never enough. Public policy, particularly expensive public policy, must actually work.

That rule is now being echoed by Doug Bandow of the Cato Institute in *The Freeman* magazine.

“Emotion and intention seem to have become the principal determinants of government policy. People are poor? Increase the minimum wage,” Bandow writes. “Not everyone can afford a home? Create a dozen housing subsidy programs. Some people don't have health insurance? Enact Medicaid, Medicare, and Obamacare. There is an infinitesimal chance of something bad happening somewhere somehow? Issue a regulation making everyone spend a lot of money and effort to ensure that it doesn't.”

Consequences matter.

“This widespread inability to compare consequences to intentions is a basic problem of humanity,” Bandow explains. “In fact, it's one of the reasons the Founders desired to limit government power and constrain politicians. How to deal with people who meant ill was perhaps the most important problem of foreign policy. What to do about those who wanted to do good — and thus often were more dangerous — was mostly a concern of domestic policy.”

That's why the government's powers were limited.

“Even if you had weird ideas for transforming the American people, it wouldn't do you much good to get elected president or to Congress,” he says. “The federal government wasn't authorized by the Constitution to engage in soul-molding. Moreover, there would be strong resistance to any attempt to expand federal power. The constitutional system preserved abundant state authority.

Three federal branches offered ‘checks and balances’ to abusive officials or majorities. Even Congress was divided into two very different chambers operating on very different rules.”

This was by design. The Founders distrusted strong government — and for good reason. Government can do more harm than good, particularly when it's focused on intentions rather than results.

“Nowhere has this been more destructive than in the area of poverty,” Bandow notes. “How to deal with the poor who, Jesus told us, would always be with us? As Charles Murray demonstrated so devastatingly three decades ago in his famous book, ‘Losing Ground,’ ever-expanding federal anti-poverty initiatives ended up turning poor people into permanent wards of Washington. Worse, unconditional welfare benefits turned out to discourage education, punish work, inhibit marriage, preclude family formation, and, ultimately, destroy community.”

Another dramatic example is the cumbersome regulatory process for new medicines.

“The rise of AIDS brought the problem into stark relief, as people faced an ugly death while the bureaucratic, rules-bound FDA denied them the only effective medicine, AZT, in order to make sure it didn’t have harmful side effects,” he adds. “Years before, the agency held up approval of beta-blockers, killing people lest they suffer some lesser harm from taking the drug.”

Most people active in public policy and government in general are there with the best purposes.

“Few people in politics fail to claim to be acting for the public good,” Bandow says. “In many cases they really believe it. But good intentions are never enough. Consequences are critical.”