



Interview with Leslie Carbone

by Krystle Weeks
October 6, 2009

Last weekend, I had the opportunity to attend the Americans for Prosperity Defending the American Dream Summit. While at this event, I had the opportunity to meet with Leslie Carbone, who used to serve as the Director of Tax Policy at FRC. Leslie just published a book, *Slaying Leviathan: The Moral Case For Tax Reform*, and it is a great examination of tax policy from a moral perspective. Below is the interview:

KW: Could you tell me why you decided to write *Slaying Leviathan*?

LC:

I wrote my book to help people understand why progressive taxation, and the wealth redistribution that it supports, are morally, as well as economically, hazardous.

KW: What do you think is the number one problem with the current tax code?

LC:

There are so many problems with the tax code, and they all feed on each other so much, that I find it impossible to pinpoint one primary problem, one single bullet. I think that what's wrong with progressive income taxation can be summed up in three, overlapping, problems: It's unwise, unjust, and immoral. It's unwise because it actually diminishes prosperity, rather than enhancing it. It's unjust because it perverts the function of the government it supports; as our Declaration of Independence asserts, civil government is established to secure our rights, but progressive taxation, and redistributionary spending, actually violate our rights. Finally, it's immoral: It's immoral because it discourages the virtuous behavior that creates wealth while it sanctions vices like resentment, because it diminishes economic—and thus moral—freedom, because it fosters immoral social behavior (such as cohabitation and divorce) and their attendant social pathologies, and because it inserts the government into the family's or the individual's moral decision-making process, giving the government a moral power it shouldn't have.

KW: In the book, you mentioned that there is a moral reason for tax reform. Since there seems to be zero transparency at the government level about where our taxes directly go, do you think that this lays out the case for full transparency by the government?

LC:

I'm all in favor of government transparency, and part of the problem with our leviathan state is that it's so big, and spends so much money, that nobody can keep track of it all. So I'd say that restoring the federal government to its proper, limited functions, as enumerated in Article I, Section 8, of our Constitution (that ingenious document) and reducing taxes to what's necessary to pay for those functions would go a long way toward making it easier for us to fulfill our duty as citizens of a republic to watch what our government is doing.

KW: Would you favor a flat tax or the fair tax?

LC:

Either would be an enormous improvement over the byzantine mess we have now, and I'm looking forward to the day when we have a robust public debate about which kind of fundamental tax reform we want. My book lays out and analyzes the various options for tax reform, but it doesn't take a firm position in favor of any particular plan. I did that on purpose. My book is intended to help make the case for fundamental tax reform, and to inform a coming debate over what that reform should look like. We've seen recently, with the

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bank bail-out and the “stimulus” package (to pick just a couple of examples) what happens when we rush a “solution” through without adequate public debate. So rather than say, “Here’s the problem, and here’s the solution,” I’m trying in my book to say, “Here’s the problem; let’s talk about and make sure we fully understand it, and next let’s talk about how we want to come together as Americans to solve it.”

⒱: Do you feel the tax code punishes families and if so, could you elaborate on the ways our current government can fix this?

.C:

Sure, there are the specifics, like the marriage penalty, which actually punish some people for getting and staying married. But, to pick just a couple of examples, our current tax code hurts families by suppressing prosperity, making it harder to support a family, and by steering families into government-sanctioned choices (e.g. home ownership through borrowing, via the mortgage deduction) rather than leaving them properly free to decide on their own financial priorities. We really need fundamental tax reform to address these problems; piecemeal fixes just don’t work.

⒱: I read another tax reform book two months ago by two experts at Cato Institute entitled, Global Tax Revolution, and the authors recommended abolishing the corporate and income taxes. Do you think that this will keep more businesses in the United States?

.C:

Absolutely, taxes discourage whatever is taxed; that includes maintaining a business.

⒱: Lastly, there seems to be more corruption in Congress, and recently, Congress has voted for pay increases, giving the Architect of the Capitol a pay raise, and providing more money to fix the House buildings. Do you feel that there needs to be more reform within our government to help make them more accountable to the taxpayer?

.C:

Our Founders understood the corrupting tendency of power, and we as citizens of the republic they created must try to understand it too. I fear that it’s a little naive to expect government to reform itself. We are responsible for our government; we’re their boss, and we need to hold them accountable to us. “Eternal vigilance is the price of liberty.”

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