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The Evil of Taxation

By Michael Tanner Posted: Apr 13, 2010

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Tax Day is upon us. As we prepare to hand more of our hard-earned money over to the government, some are making the case that we should be happy, even proud, to do it; it is "our patriotic duty," in the words of Vice President Biden. In fact, earlier this week, Larry Haas made the case eloquently in this space that taxes are simply the price we pay for government services.

Haas and others are undoubtedly correct that if we are going to have government programs, we should pay for them. Still, Haas and his brethren miss the point. If taxes are sometimes a necessary evil, it is worth remembering that they are still an evil. Taxes are not voluntary. They are the forcible taking of one man's property by others. Every dollar that a person pays in taxes is one less dollar that that person has to spend on the goods, services, or charitable activities that they choose. Taxation makes us all a little less free.

And it makes us all a little less wealthy: not just as a society, but as a nation. It is important to realize that government doesn't create wealth, it simply redistributes it, often inefficiently. Money taken from the private sector through taxes frequently is diverted to less productive, less wealth-creating uses, leaving us with a less prosperous nation.

Haas and others have a point, however, when they suggest that for many conservatives opposition to taxes has become a dogma that renders unnecessary any discussion about the size and role of government.

Tax cuts have become the magic elixir that cures all ills. Government could continue to grow. Programs could be piled onto programs. But as long as we continued to cut taxes, conservatives never had to say "no."

This is where Haas has it at least partially right. The debate shouldn't be about taxes, but about government. Our government has certain limited constitutional functions, and we shouldn't hesitate to pay for them. But if the government is doing things it shouldn't, if government programs are inefficient and counterproductive, if they do more harm than good or could be done better by civil society, we should eliminate those programs. That's a debate worth having.

Taxes make us less free. But an ever larger, ever more intrusive government does, too. It would be wonderful if anti-tax conservatives remembered this.

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