

XCVIII – Failure Is the Health of the State

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By Butler Shaffer

Serious students of political systems are aware of Randolph Bourne's observation that "war is the health of the state." As far as it goes, this statement offers great insight into the symbiotic relationship between state power and the mass butchery of human beings. The 20th century was one of rampant, totalitarian statism which, not coincidentally, produced the deaths of some 200,000,000 in state-run wars and genocides. That political systems such as the Soviet Union, Nazi Germany, the United States, China, and Great Britain — to identify the principal players — expanded their international and domestic powers through the systematic killing of mass populations, confirms Bourne's proposition.

But there is a deeper meaning to be found in these words. War also represents the failure of the state to accomplish the enunciated purposes for which its staunchest defenders insist: the need to protect the lives, liberties, and properties of its citizenry. The "Declaration of Independence" announces the purpose of government as being to "secure" the "Rights" to "Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." The preamble to the United States Constitution declares the "common defence," the "general welfare," and the securing of the "blessings of liberty" as the *raison d'être* of this system. If you were to ask your neighbors why they believe in the need for government, I strongly suspect these reasons would be their almost universal response.

And yet, the larger and more powerful any political system becomes, the more it fails to accomplish these stated ends. Part of the explanation for this phenomenon is to be found in the study of "chaos," which informs us that the more complex systems become, the more unpredictable are the consequences of their actions. A localized government that undertakes to manage the streets and sewer systems of Mud Flats, Kansas will do far less mischief — even on a per capita basis — than will an empire bent on extending "democracy" (i.e., its autocratic rule) to the entire world.

The unpredictable influences that complexity has upon human behavior are compounded by another symbiotic factor: the interrelated nature of institutional power and individual identity. Political systems expand their size and authority not through the conquest of other lands and populations, but through the conquest of their own people. The ultimate power of any state system is to be found in the mindset of men and women who, largely through conditioning, identify their sense of purpose and being with "their" nation-state — or, for that matter, any other institutional abstraction.

The dynamics of the process reflect a willingness of people to think of themselves and the institution with which they identify, as virtually synonymous terms. The man who introduced himself, at a business conference, as "I am Xerox," manifested this phenomenon. (This is a topic I have explored more thoroughly in my book, Calculated Chaos: Institutional Threats to Peace and Human Survival.) Most people look outside themselves to such agencies as the state for the transcendence and power they cannot find within. If their lives are mundane and inglorious, they imagine, perhaps they can discover a vicarious sense of accomplishment and glory through their association with state power.

If people have learned to regard their sense of being as indistinguishable from the state, what are the likely responses such men and women will make when the unpredictable forces of chaos generate failures in the plans and programs undertaken by state agencies? Will such people be inclined to admit that the abstraction to which they have attached their very identities is incapable of fashioning the world into promised forms? Will they examine the assumptions upon which their thinking has been based, perhaps to discover that the order they have been seeking in the hallowed, marbled halls of the state is to be found elsewhere?

The weakness that causes men and women to abandon themselves in favor of an "ego boundary" attachment to the state, makes it unlikely that most of them will suddenly reject their substituted sense of self. Instead, the failure of the state to accomplish its avowed purposes intensifies the commitments of its supporters. The greater the failures of the state, the more personal energy and resources people are willing to devote to it in an effort to redeem its legitimacy. The more we commit to the state, the larger and more powerful it becomes in order to deal with an ever-increasing range of conditions. As the state expands its reach, the uncertainties of chaos are iterated back into society, producing even more failures to which further political responses are demanded. Such processes contribute to what Leopold Kohr referred to as the "size theory of social misery."

Few of us behave in such an irrational manner in the marketplace. If Lucy's Greasy-Sleeve Diner repeatedly gave its customers food poisoning, few would return. If Snerdly Electronics produced computers that failed to perform properly, or if the Belchfire 8 automobile continued to have defective steering problems that caused accidents, most consumers would cease doing business with them. We would go into convulsive laughter if such businesses were to plead "pay us more money, and we'll solve these problems." But when state agencies fail in their declared purposes, most of us line up to support bond measures or increased taxation to be spent on behalf of the failed systems with their failed programs!

The government school system has been an unqualified disaster when measured by the expectations parents have had of it: namely, to produce knowledgeable students with a capacity for sound reasoning, creative thinking, and problem-solving skills. (That such schools have served state interests quite well in generating a subjugated citizenry, is a topic

I have taken up earlier.) As the schools continue failing to meet these parental demands, they nonetheless remain beneficiaries of a vicious circle of futility in which more and more tax dollars are directed toward its support. The more the government schools fail, in other words, the more resources people are willing to devote to them!

The same syndrome appears with the state's police system: historically, the more such agencies have failed to prevent violent crimes, the more tax dollars and police powers most citizens are prepared to transfer to them. I strongly suspect that much of the support for gun-control legislation comes from the statist who understand that, if ordinary men and women were free to arm themselves — as police officers routinely are — the violent crime rate would likely plummet, depriving the state of a rationale for an expanded police system.

By far, however, the clearest example of how the failure of the state to accomplish its expressed purposes benefits the state, is found in the system known as "national defense." "If we had no government, what would keep another country from coming in and taking us over?" is a question at the top of the list of those confronted by the proposition of a politics-free world. It is the international equivalent to the domestic question of how people's lives, liberties, and properties are to be safeguarded. That America has already been "taken over" by hostile forces is not the answer such questioners seek. The fear that the Chinese, or Germans, or some other national power might invade and take over Washington troubles them more than does the fact that home-grown tyrants have done so!

Even taking the avowed national defense purposes at face value, war is a primary example of the failure of the state. A nation-state goes to war either because it is an unprovoked aggressor, or because its defensive efforts have failed. In either case, war exposes the lives of a state's citizens to death and devastation, which is what its declared purpose was to prevent. Had the hundreds of billions of dollars spent by the United States on defense been effective, there would have been no 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center. For those inclined to learn from experience, these attacks stand as quiet testimony to the failure of Washington foreign policy and military systems to protect the American people.

Though the Afghan and Iraqi people had nothing to do with the events of 9/11, most Americans endorsed their government's bombing and invasion of these countries as a way of restoring their image of the state. Why do so many of us behave so irrationally — a trait shared by many in other countries? Whether we are considering the failures of government schools, the criminal justice system, or the national defense racket, most of us are inwardly aware that the infusion of more power and tax dollars into these programs will produce no more beneficent results than have previous decades of the same thinking.

Most of us continue to sanction such statist systems because we lack the inner courage to confront our own thinking. We continue reinvesting our souls and the lives of our children in systems that define who we are to ourselves. When those systems fail, we reenergize our

commitments to them, for to acknowledge the failure of the state is to admit to the inadequacy of our personal identity. If the state is a failure, we are a failure.

This is how the failure of systems with which we identify ourselves works to the benefit — rather than the demise — of such agencies. For the same reason that the police system prospers by its ineffectiveness in protecting citizens from crime, the state benefits from its foreign policy/national defense shortcomings. In each instance, most men and women are prepared to grant the state more authority and material resources in a vain effort to shore up their faith in the system.

What else – other than the salvation of one's ego identity — can account for the readiness of most Americans to grant, without question, virtually any demands for increased power made by the Bush administration after 9/11, a willingness that remains largely unabated even today? If one accepts that the attacks on the World Trade Center represented a failure of protection and defense by the American government, the *cui bono* question must then be asked: who benefited from such failure? If you were to compile a list of possible beneficiaries of these attacks, who — other than the United States government — would be enumerated?

We continue to experience American society as a well-organized system of plunder, violence, warfare, and other dehumanizing attributes, because of the content of our thinking. As long as we insist upon loving these systems more than we do ourselves, our children and grandchildren will continue to be ground down and destroyed in the process. We need to stop revering and energizing these vicious agencies that have never been able to deliver on their promises of a free, peaceful, orderly, and secure world.

We need to discover a social paradigm that does not depend upon a symbiotic relationship between individual weakness and organizational failure. The marketplace — and I do not mean the prevailing neo-mercantilist, corporate-state corruption of the market — offers one such alternative. By its nature, the market system is success-oriented, while the state thrives on failure. But which model are people taught to despise and which to embrace as the means to their well-being? Will continuing to empower a system whose well-being is grounded in failure likely lead to any result other than the further decline of Western civilization?

The Best of Butler Shaffer

