

LXXIX – The Dysfunctional Society

[LRC lewrockwell.com/1970/01/butler-shaffer/lxxix-the-dysfunctional-society](http://www.lewrockwell.com/1970/01/butler-shaffer/lxxix-the-dysfunctional-society)

By Butler Shaffer

Like the Titanic, the American ship-of-state has hit an iceberg, and it is not timely to ask the ship's orchestra for an encore of "America the Beautiful!" A recurring theme in these articles is that the American branch of Western civilization is in a state of complete collapse, and that only a fundamental change in our thinking about the nature and forms of social behavior can reverse our destructive course. I return to this topic not because I enjoy playing Cassandra — the "disaster lobby" is already packed — but because I am unable to count myself among the "ignorance is bliss" crowd that would prefer such probing questions as whether Janet Jackson should be fined for exposing her breast on television; the propriety of Arnold Schwarzenegger's "girly man" comment; or whether gays and lesbians should be allowed to marry.

The hurried enactment of the Patriot Act, the creation of a Department of Homeland Security, and the wholesale expansion of police powers, were reactions of the political establishment to the realization that it had lost the support and respect of millions of Americans. You may recall, in those pre-9/11 years, the increased interest in political secession; private militias; and the emergence of systems of education, health-care, and dispute resolution, that challenged politically-dominated practices. Even President Clinton lamented the fact that so many Americans "hate their government," while his wife was scheming for ways to restrain the unhampered liberty of the Internet, which functioned contrary to the establishment's institutionally-defined and controlled news and information sources.

You may also recall how, immediately after 9/11, most Americans quickly got back into line and, emulating members of Congress, fell to their knees reciting, as their new catechisms, whatever unfocused and dishonest babbling oozed from the lips of George W. Bush. Flag manufacturing suddenly became a major growth industry, as the faithful lined up to purchase and display this symbol of unquestioning obedience to state power. Fear — carefully nurtured with a steady diet of "warnings," color-coded "alerts," and, that scariest of all specters, those "unknown" forces of which we were told to be constantly aware — laid claim to the souls of most Americans. Even today, nearly three years after 9/11, a so-called "independent 9/11 commission" advises of the need for the state to centralize all of its spying, surveillance, and other information-gathering functions into the hands of one agency to be headed up by some born-again Laventri Beria, perhaps under the appropriate title "Inspector General."

There have also been trial-balloon news reports that the Bush administration will propose a national system of psychological profiling of Americans, to be followed up with appropriate drugs to alleviate identifiable "problems." The generation with which I grew up — having read Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* — would have treated such a proposal with alarm. I suspect that the response of most prostrated Americans today would be that, as long as the drugs are FDA approved, and no groups are singled out on the basis of race, gender, lifestyle, or religion for "treatment," there would be little objection.

Watch how quickly most Americans — being carefully orchestrated by the politicians and the media — will respond with the sense of urgency into which their fear-stricken minds have become accustomed. Any men and women of libertarian sentiments who question the wisdom of allowing the American state to proceed along its planned course toward neo-Stalinist despotism, will be condemned as "America haters," or insensitive to the victims of 9/11 and their grieving families. Should the matter arise during what will be laughingly referred to as the upcoming presidential "debates," both Bush and Kerry will try to outdo one another in their enthusiasm for increased draconianism.

These are not temporary measures — like wartime rationing — that will be put aside when an emergency is over and "normalcy" returns. The Bush administration's allusions to the unending nature of the "war on terror" tells us that the "emergency" is a permanent one. The "terrorism" against which the state now organizes itself goes far beyond suicide bombers crashing airliners into office buildings. It is the "terror" experienced by a politically-structured establishment that has reached the outer limits of its efforts to control life processes in service to its narrow ends. A world that is becoming increasingly decentralized — whether in the form of alternative schooling, religions, and health-care; less-structured business-management practices and communications systems; political separatist movements, etc. — strikes terror in the minds of those who have created and become dependent upon centralized systems. The "terrorist" forces against which the state now mobilizes its most restrictive, punitive, surveillant, and violent mechanisms of control, is life itself; it is you and me, as Pogo Possum so insightfully observed a half-century ago.

"America," as a social system, simply doesn't work well anymore, and there are latent life forces that urge us in other directions. The institutional agencies around which our lives have been organized are increasingly in conflict with the interests of people grown weary of increasing burdens of taxation and regulation, and of seeking ersatz purposes in life. The political establishment's war against the American people — in which some 6.9 million are imprisoned or on probation or parole — is the most compelling evidence for the utter failure of a society dominated by the state.

But no system can last long in open hostility to its members. Trying to hold a society together through constantly reinforced fear, self-righteousness, surveillance, prison sentences, SWAT teams, expanded police forces, and increased legal and military violence,

is as futile as a family trying to sustain itself through violent abuse. As we have been witnessing in the nearly three years after 9/11, such efforts necessitate an ever-increasing use of lies, deception, and disingenuousness, for reality has a persistent way of making itself known. Such methods also eventually trigger a resentment, as even the most fervent flag-waver is found to have a breaking point. Paraphrasing the words of Star Wars' Princess Leia — in confronting one of the tyrants — "we are like sand in your hand; the tighter you squeeze us, the more of us that slip out."

Even the long-standing political systems and practices no longer stand in the way of establishment ambitions. Congress has been rendered little more than a rubber-stamp that approves whatever is placed before it by its masters. Despite the lies and collusions that underlay the Bush administration's determination to go to war — a war that has thus far killed some ten to fifteen thousand people, wounded tens of thousands more, and cost billions of dollars to prosecute — I have not heard a single squeak from any member of Congress to impeach any of the principals involved. When one contrasts this with the impeachment of Bill Clinton for his lies about sex — lies that led to the deaths of no one — much is revealed about the bankrupt nature of modern America.

Even the Constitution has become largely irrelevant in the political scheme of things. For the more gullible, it can be said that the Constitution is what keeps the government from doing all of the terrible things that it does; that while it is not a perfect system, it's a whole lot better than what we have! The will of the President and the Attorney General now seem to override constitutional sentiments about "due process of law" and a "speedy and public trial."

Local governments have taken to further restricting First Amendment "free speech" rights by designating "protest zones" to which criticism of the government is confined. On the eve of the Democratic national convention in Boston, a federal judge recently upheld such a blatant denial of free speech, even as he characterized it as "an affront to free expression." The judge admitted that the zoned area created by Boston city officials resembled a concentration camp, with a razor-wired chain-link fence surrounding it, and netting overhead. If he does regard this as such an affront — which it clearly is, as anyone who bothers to read the First Amendment will quickly discover — why did he not have the integrity to uphold his oath of office and strike down the restriction?

The answer to this question is to be found in the government's long-standing attitudes toward individual liberty in general, and freedom of expression in particular. The courts have always given an expanded definition to powers granted to the government, and a restricted definition to individual liberties. "Freedom of expression" will be protected only if the speech is an ineffective challenge to state policies. Effective speech — no matter how peacefully expressed — will always be considered a worthy target for governmental restraint.

The "freedom of expression" about which even the politicians like to prattle, has been twisted from a celebration of pluralism into a demand for a stifling uniformity of thought and action. We live in a period of rigidly enforced "political correctness," a practice containing a glaring contradiction: an alleged belief in "diversity." But the reality of "diversity," particularly on college campuses, amounts to nothing more than the encouragement of men and women from a variety of racial, ethnic, and lifestyle groups who advocate state collectivism. If you doubt this, observe how genuine diversity — in the form of libertarian/free market opinion, anti-feminist women speakers, or blacks who are critical of the plantation politics of the Democratic party — is discouraged (or even prohibited) on many campuses. Freedom of expression is important to any healthy society because it challenges existing thought and practices. It is supposed to be disruptive of the status quo. But as the protestors in Boston have discovered as their messages are kept imprisoned in wire cages on an isolated street distant from the Democratic convention, "free speech" in America is now confined to speech that is comfortable to establishment interests!

The irony of it all: that such a court-enforced mockery of free expression should take place in Boston, where the voices of John Hancock and Sam Adams once made life miserable for the political establishment. The closest any of the Democratic party conventioners will get to the spirit of Sam Adams will be what is handed them by a bartender!

People cannot get near the Boston convention center without "proper credentials," although Boston police officers plan on confronting conventioners with protests of their own, in support of their contract demands with the city. Meanwhile, the state capitol building is surrounded by armed police officers. What better evidence than this of how distant political systems are from ordinary people, and how government officials are terrified by the very people they are supposed to "represent!" But when the state increasingly compels people to do what they do not want to do, prevents them from doing what they do want to do, and forcibly takes more money from them in the form of taxes and fines, why wouldn't government officials start to worry?

About twenty years ago, I made a tongue-in-cheek suggestion that the government might — under the guise of promoting individual liberty — enact a statute mandating people to exercise their "freedom." People could be required to visit a "freedom exercise center" in their communities where, under the watchful and protective eye of policemen, they could express any opinions they wanted. This would all take place in a small room, from which others would be excluded — in the name of protecting the privacy of the speaker, of course. Only the police officers would watch to make certain that he or she had, in fact, expressed their opinions. Those who failed to do so would be prosecuted for a failure to "protect the exercise of American freedom."

I hesitate to mention this earlier proposal, given the present disposition of both Republican and Democratic politicians. I can just imagine John Kerry and George Bush racing to the microphones to be the first to propose this measure which, I am certain, would immediately be endorsed by the same gang of fools who fly flags from their homes and cars, memorize the gurglings of Bill O'Reilly, or write editorials for major newspapers.

This is what America has become, and is destined to remain unless either (a) some major metamorphosis in our thinking takes us in a different direction, or, (b) like the Soviet Union, the present dysfunctional system collapses of its inherent contradictions and hostilities to life processes. While it is impossible to predict the long-term course of complex systems, events seem to point to option (b) as the likely prognosis, a suspicion that appears to be shared by members of the political establishment. The fate of the American civilization in such a post-collapse period will depend upon whether a sufficient intelligence and creative energy will be available to transform the culture into the kind of free and peaceful society it has long ceased to be.

The Best of Butler Shaffer

