



## Some Questions

I'm writing these words in the early-morning serenity of my home, two weeks after the September 11 terrorist attacks. All appears peaceful, fine, and as it was before September 11. My son, Thomas, is upstairs sleeping the sweet sleep of a child too young to comprehend what is happening. The world that he understands is that of *Clifford the Big Red Dog* cartoons, toy trains, and laughing with his mommy and daddy.

His child's world was always destined to change into an adult's world, with more worries, more pressing expectations, greater responsibilities. But by historical standards, even an adult's world in modern America is wonderful.

The pressures ordinary American adults confront today are not those of most of our ancestors. We don't regularly watch, helpless, as many of our loved ones die of famine. When our incomes fall, we don't perish. And we've conquered legions of the diseases that killed our ancestors with brutal regularity. Most of what we today regard as hardships are trivial nothings compared to the cruel hardships of just a few generations past.

But will it continue to be so?

Until September 11, I was confident that Thomas would grow up in a world even better than the wonderful world his mother and I grew up in. I was confident that his future

would offer him an array of choices richer even than the smorgasbord available to those of us born during the mid-twentieth century. And I was confident that the most precious possession he could have—liberty—would grow.

My confidence in this future has plummeted. Even the great and wise optimist Julian Simon warned that warfare—legitimate and illegitimate—spells trouble. Improvement in the quality of our lives depends on free minds and free markets. Indeed, civilization itself must be nourished by a never-ending stream of thoughts and plans and actions that are creative and diverse. Genuine diversity of thoughts, plans, and actions—genuine creativity—genuine experimentation—genuine freedom to challenge existing dogmas, deities, and demagogues—all these requirements for a free society are at the very least severely cramped during wartime.

I don't venture here any opinion on just what steps the U.S. government today should take to punish those responsible for the September 11 attacks. But I do offer some questions that I hope people ask and demand be answered reasonably.

### Centralizing Airport Security

Does centralizing the security of airports really ensure greater safety? In the wake of the attacks, many pundits and politicians have assumed that a federal takeover of airport security would make us safer. But why? With centralization, experimentation with different security-enhancing measures

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*Donald Boudreaux (dboudrea@gmu.edu) is chairman of the economics department of George Mason University and former president of FEE.*

declines. Any new idea must first be approved by a central authority. If the idea is good, its implementation will likely be delayed by a cumbersome bureaucracy. If the idea is bad, the entire country will suffer when it is implemented. No airport or airline whose management has a dissenting opinion about security procedures, perhaps based on special knowledge, can escape the centrally imposed, one-size-fits-all measures.

More important, with centralization, the means of distinguishing between good and bad ideas for improvement are weak. By allowing each airport and airline to devise its own creative ways of enhancing security, we can compare different approaches. Unlike centralized provision of security, this real-world experience with different approaches will provide far more reliable and nuanced information on how best to promote security.

It's a dangerous illusion to suppose that one central government authority in charge of airport and airline security will actually promote greater security. Privatization of airports is a far more promising step.

## The Threat to Liberty

Will the vast new powers now being given to the federal government—powers that better enable it to spy on private people—really not threaten essential liberties? It's both foolish and un-American to suppose that such powers pose no significant threat to the liberties of the very people they ostensibly are designed to protect. Washington, Jefferson, Madison, and others of the founding generation understood well that government is a threat to liberty and, therefore, it must be forever held in check—not only by formal constitutional fetters but, more importantly, by an ethic of skepticism by citizens.

It's tempting, when attacked by foreigners, to cast this ethic of skepticism aside. It's tempting to tell our guys, "Do whatever you must to get those bad foreign guys." But what happens when the foreign guys are gotten? Does the state then automatically, of its own accord, shrink its power base? Many

people imagine that it does, but Robert Higgs carefully documents in *Crisis and Leviathan* that when peace returns the state never relinquishes all the additional powers accumulated during war. Centralization of society ratchets upward. Freedom ratchets downward.

## What About Foreign Policy?

Will President Bush, his advisers, and Congress give serious thought to ending the long-standing U.S. policy of using military might to engage in nation-building and nation-policing? The world is an immensely complicated place. Even the best and the brightest government advisers cannot begin to understand the nuances of foreign political, cultural, and military situations—situations, incidentally, that are forever in flux. Predicting the ramifications of U.S. government intervention into the politics of other nations is impossible.

What we do know is that such intervention causes many of those foreign peoples whose governments are out of political favor with Uncle Sam to hate Americans. Even if unwarranted, such hatred is a raw fact. And this fact puts millions of innocent Americans at risk of dying at the hands of terrorists. By adopting a policy of political neutrality—a policy endorsed by, among others, Washington and Jefferson—our government will remove a major source of inspiration for terrorism against Americans.

I confess that I'm not confident that enough people will ask such questions.

So, as my son sleeps upstairs, his future awaiting him, I despair for him and his generation. Government's power will expand at the expense of liberty. And adding insult to this awful injury, Americans likely will remain insufficiently secure from terrorist attacks. The notion that our diplomats and generals can both intervene as world policemen *and* effectively ensure the security of American civilians is a gargantuan conceit. Freeing ourselves from this conceit is necessary if we are to retain any hope of genuine security and liberty. □