



Mencken's Wisdom

BY DONALD J. BOUDREAUX

This year marks the 50th anniversary of the death of H.L. Mencken (1880–1956). I wish that this Bard of Baltimore had lived far longer—past the age of Methuselah—so that those of us born after World War II could have enjoyed his brilliant insights into the likes of the space race, Watergate, Gerald Ford's "Whip Inflation Now" buttons, Nancy Reagan's "Just Say No" campaign, the "HillaryCare" scare, and the current President Bush's big-government conservatism.

Those who know Mencken's writings realize that he would have guffawed at such a wish. Mencken, after all, was the consummate realist. He was mature in the best sense of the word, seeing reality as clearly as any human being can see it, reporting what he saw and not what he imagined, avoiding fantasies no matter how wonderful they would be if they were reality, and refusing to fall for any and all crackpots and their schemes.

Mencken was and remains, in my opinion, America's greatest writer—one whose energetic style perfectly complemented his extensive learning and deep wisdom.

Here are four of my favorite Menckenisms.

The most dangerous man, to any government, is the man who is able to think things out for himself, without regard to the prevailing superstitions and taboos. Almost inevitably he comes to the conclusion that the government he lives under is dishonest, insane and intolerable. . . . The average man, whatever his errors otherwise, at least sees clearly that government is something lying outside of him and outside the generality of his fellow men—that it is a separate, independent and often hostile power, only partly

under his control, and capable of doing him great harm. (*A Mencken Chrestomathy*, pp. 145–146)

Mencken is correct about the kind of person most antagonistic to the state. Someone who thinks for himself neither needs nor welcomes someone else to think for him. And this person's independence of mind puts him on guard against the widespread superstition that government can perform miracles—miracles such as reducing the cost of some good simply by declaring that it may not be sold at a price higher than one specified by the government.

Unfortunately, I worry that Mencken's description of the "average man" is no longer valid. Does today's average American regard government as "something lying outside of him"? On specific issues, the answer is yes. Gun-control advocates, for example, regard Congress's failure to outlaw gun ownership as the choice not of some collective entity deserving respect but rather as the result of pernicious influences on the body politic. But the general attitude seems to

be that government is us—that when government acts, it is us acting collectively—that the only, or most real, instance of our doing anything is when government acts in our name.

Reflect how often you encounter the phrase "we as a nation." "We as a nation" have chosen to fight a war on drugs. "We as a nation" cruelly abandoned poor people to Katrina's flood waters. "We as a nation" should regulate coal mines more strictly. And on and on.



H. L. Mencken
Enoch Pratt Free Library, Baltimore

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We as a nation need Mencken to remind us that we are individuals.

The kind of man who demands that government enforce his ideas is always the kind whose ideas are idiotic. (*A Mencken Chrestomathy*, p. 622)

This insight is among my very favorites. Being sensible, sensible ideas seldom must be imposed by force. Sometimes sensible ideas are implemented gradually, as practices with widespread advantages displace less-advantageous practices and become part of customary behavior. Sometimes sensible ideas are adopted consciously and quickly, through the art of persuasion or the rigors of scientific demonstration.

In contrast, idiotic ideas have nothing going for them. Most people who voluntarily adopt idiotic ideas soon abandon them if these ideas hamper the ability to thrive in the real world. The only way to implement an idiotic idea widely and surely is through force.

Protectionism, for example, is a truly idiotic idea, premised on the ridiculous notion that a division of labor extending across political boundaries makes us poorer. If the CEO of General Motors travels the country trying to sell this idea—trying to persuade Americans to “buy American”—some people might fall for this plea. But most of us, when spending our own money, will take the best deals we find regardless of the nationality of those offering the deals. The result is greater prosperity.

So protectionism's only hope for taking root is for it to be imposed by force. Such is the glory of idiotic ideas.

But matters get worse: as force comes to be more widely accepted (itself a stupendously idiotic idea!), people have less and less incentive to reject their defective ideas in favor of sensible ones. With government standing ready to rent its force to the highest bidders, the politically influential can now more reliably force their idiotic notions on unwilling others.

The typical politician is not only a rascal but also a jackass, so he greatly values the puerile notoriety and adulation that sensible men try to avoid. (*The Impossible Mencken*, p. 66)

There's nothing like telling the crowd not only that the emperor is stark naked, but that he's ugly to boot. One of our great political myths is that politicians are public servants—men and women who seek office “to change the world” or “to serve their country”—people whose public statements reveal their private, noble sentiments—officials with supernatural powers to care about each of us and to sacrifice for us in ways that would shame our mothers.

The reality, as Mencken understood, is that people seek public office generally for the same reason that people want to be movie stars or rock idols. They want their faces to be recognized; they want to be applauded as Very Important People: and they want to feel superior to the millions of people who are never interviewed on television, quoted in the *New York Times*, or feted by the rich and the famous. They want to get seated without reservations at the most exclusive restaurants.

These desires are natural. Anyone who reflects honestly on himself will see that he, too, gets a thrill from the thought of possessing fame and its accompanying perks. But as Mencken says, sensible men nevertheless try to avoid such fame, for this desire is juvenile. Its pursuit—and, much more, its possession—distracts people from such genuinely worthwhile goals as being an attentive parent and friend, being honest, and being productive.

It is the theory of all modern civilized governments that they protect and foster the liberty of the citizen; it is the practice of all of them to limit its exercise, and sometimes very narrowly. (*The Impossible Mencken*, p. 74)

Says it all.

