

No pockets picked, No legs broken

Michael Costello/Lewiston Tribune

The Lewiston City Council gay rights debate should focus more on delineating the appropriate limits on the exercise of government authority, rather than on the morality of bedroom behavior.

Any government's position on sexual behavior should be one of neutrality. It's nobody's business and government should not insert itself into private transactions between individuals. Thomas Jefferson once pithily explained his indifference toward other people's religious faith: "It does me no injury for my neighbor to say there are 20 gods or no God. It neither picks my pocket nor breaks my leg." The same test should be applied to sexual orientation.

On the other hand, a government that grants itself the authority to insert itself into private transactions can pick my pocket and break my leg. The proposed gay rights law before the Lewiston City Council would punish unapproved opinions on homosexuality with fines of up to \$1,000 and jail time up to six months.

I have a rule. Government authority should never be exercised to engineer society. As Mao Zedong pithily observed, ultimately all government power flows from the barrel of a gun. And guns are not the appropriate tools for influencing social evolution. Believing that government should exert its power to force social evolution in one direction or the other represents the kind of thinking that made Mao the historical monster he is today. Let's leave that sort of thuggishness where it belongs, in the ashcan of history, buried with the likes of Joseph Stalin, Adolf Hitler, Pol Pot, Fidel Castro and other heroes of the left.

Gays are already winning the debate without coercive government intervention. And where coercion is applied, resentment flourishes. Witness the Tri Cities florist who was forced to provide floral arrangements for a gay wedding that offended his religious convictions.

America is growing more libertarian by the day. A majority of Americans favor gay marriage. The public's opinion on that, and other gay issues, has evolved rapidly, as evidenced by the fact that Lewiston City Councilor Jesse Maldonado's proposed gay rights law was not immediately laughed out of chambers. Just a few years ago, it almost certainly would have been. That the Lewiston City Council seriously entertains such a proposal shows just how rapidly attitudes are changing.

The left often points to the flurry of civil rights laws in the 1960s as evidence that government can and should involve itself in social engineering. But those laws would not have been possible had society not already started its evolution. That old racist, Lyndon Johnson, cynically viewed the 1964 Civil Rights Act as an opportunity to lock up African-American votes for generations. Although, Johnson did not use the term "African-American." He preferred a coarser term now forbidden just about everywhere, outside of hip-hop culture.

Social engineers also like to celebrate Harry Truman's courage for integrating the armed forces by executive order in 1948. But opinion polls, taken before the order, revealed that the military rank and file already overwhelmingly supported racial integration. Truman's executive order followed evolution. It did not lead.

The credit granted to civil rights legislation claims is greatly exaggerated. On the other hand, the mischief that such laws have generated cannot be over-exaggerated. Civil rights have devolved from pursuit of equality to preferential treatment and dependency. History tells us that once officially anointed victims get their first taste at the redistribution banquet, their appetite becomes insatiable. Santayana warned us about failing to learn the lessons of history.

Deploying government's brute force to drive social evolution is akin to performing brain surgery with a shovel. The results are never pretty, although, if we are lucky, they can amuse.

An excellent example of social engineering gone awry occurred in the 1990s, when the Clinton administration unintentionally exposed the foolishness of mindless, dogmatic enforcement of sexual equality laws. Then-Attorney General Janet Reno tried to force the Hooters restaurant chain to replace its workforce of buxom and beautiful, tank top- and shorts-wearing waitresses with hairy, pot-bellied men. The avalanche of ridicule that ensued forced Clinton to sound the retreat.

The very fact that hardly a week passes these days without another state legalizing gay marriage, either through the courts or at the ballot box, reveals just how quickly opinions are evolving. Recent polls show that a majority of Americans favor gay marriage. Social evolution is already flowing in the direction that gay rights advocates favor. Allow it to run its course.

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