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Statism: The Opiate of the Elites

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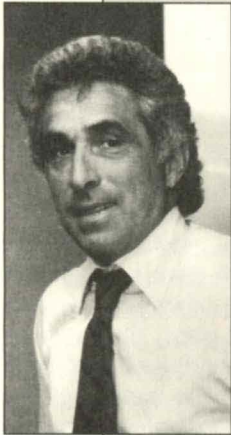
Theodore J. Forstmann is co-founder and senior partner of the private investment firm Forstmann Little & Co. The firm has invested over \$13 billion in 22 acquisitions since its founding in 1978 and has compiled an unparalleled record of investment performance.

A Cato Institute board member and Empower America co-founder, he has also

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Schwarzkopf and Paul Newman to found Boggy Creek Gang Camp, a year-round camp for chronically ill children. He is also a director of the Inner-City Scholarship Fund in New York and a co-founder of the Silver Lining Ranch in Aspen, which serves children with cancer and other life-threatening illnesses.

A graduate of Yale University and the Columbia School of Law, Mr. Forstmann is an outspoken champion of expanding opportunity and economic growth. ▲



In this issue, one of America's leading investors and philanthropists argues eloquently that we have forgotten about the Golden Rule as it applies to business and politics. Worse yet, we have traded our biblical principles and individual responsibilities for the empty promises of secularism and statism.

Mr. Forstmann's remarks were delivered at Hillsdale's January 1997 Shavano Institute for National Leadership seminar, "Educating for Virtue: The New Values Revolution," in Coronado, California.

Do unto others as you would have others do unto you. The power and significance of these eleven words reside in the fact that they represent a *spiritual* truth. This is not simply because Jesus said on the Mount, "All things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them." Nor even because it is written in mosaic law: "Whatever is hurtful to you, do not do to any other person." The spiritual authority of the Golden Rule is grounded in an even more basic assumption: that there is a Creator and that we are all equal in His eyes.

Our democracy was founded on this basic assumption, which is why we pledge our allegiance to "one nation under God." From this flows the self-evident truths: "that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights." What follows is that the individual is the spiritual center of society, and therefore the Golden Rule is self-evident as well.

From the Golden Rule to Statist Rule

But in our day, many of our leaders believe that the state—not the individual—is now the spiritual center of society. According to this view, known as “statism,” government assumes a moral importance that outweighs individual claims. Statists do not speak of government as a collection of bureaucrats, agencies, and limited constitutional powers but as the embodiment of the collective good—as community itself.

They believe that government should make decisions for individuals. Since individuals usually prefer to make their own decisions, coercion and compulsion become necessary correctives. This is why the statist has no use for the Golden Rule. The statist does not do unto others as he would have others do unto him. The others aren’t to do at all; they are to be done to and done for.

If it is true, as philosopher Michael Novak once observed, that “each immoral action sows its own irrationality into the pattern of events,” a government that breaks the moral laws encoded in the Golden Rule will have a profound effect on all those living under it.

The genesis and genius of the Golden Rule is that it is a two-way street. Statism, on the other hand, is a one-way street. The Golden Rule teaches us that we are all brothers. Statism teaches us that we are the children, and government is the parent. In fact, statisticians are looking for far more than a maternal embrace in the arms of

big government. They are looking for nothing less than a New Jerusalem, literally for redemption through the state.

Every human being has a need to believe and belong. Traditionally this impulse found expression through religion. But with the decline of clerical power in the 18th century, the search for salvation did not come to an end. Instead the intellectuals of the day began to look elsewhere for idols and answers, for kinship and community. As Paul Johnson observes in *Intellectuals*:

Statists do not speak of government as a collection of bureaucrats, agencies, and limited constitutional powers but as the embodiment of the collective good—as community itself.

For the first time in human history...men arose to assert that they could diagnose the ills of society and cure them with their own unaided intellects: more, that they could devise formulae whereby not merely the structure of society but the fundamental habits of human beings could be transformed....[These] were not servants and interpreters of the gods but substitutes. Their hero was Prometheus, who stole the celestial fire and brought it to earth.

In 1789, the Promethean spark burst into the flames of the French Revolution. Historian Will Durant recounts that revolutionary leaders “proclaimed a new theology in which Nature would be God, and heaven would be an earthly utopia in which all men would be good.” The Cathedral of Notre Dame was renamed the Temple of Reason, priests and nuns were ordered to marry, and cemeteries were required to post inscriptions telling the public that “death is an eternal sleep.”

As the revolutionary zeal spilled over into the 19th century, the French battle standard was planted in the great capitals of Europe—in Vienna, Warsaw, Berlin, and Moscow. A German college professor, watching from his window as Napoleon’s

victorious *Grand Armee* passed by, exclaimed: “I saw the World Spirit riding upon a white horse!” This was Georg Hegel, who would attempt to marry God and government at the altar of philosophy: “The Universal is to be found in the State,” he said, and “the State is the Divine Idea as it exists on earth....We must therefore worship the State as the Manifestation of the Divine on earth.”

Half a century later, Marx picked up where Hegel left off, promising that socialism could become the “functional equivalent of religion.” Religion, said Marx, was nothing more than “the sigh of a distressed creature...the spirit of spiritless conditions...the *opiate of the masses*.”

In a sense, Marx was the John the Baptist of the statist faith in the 20th century. The fact that so many were baptized in this faith confirms British writer G. K. Chesterton’s observation that “when men cease to believe in God, they will not believe in nothing, they will believe in anything.” From

this perspective, it becomes clear that statism is more than a mere ideology. It is *statism* that has become “the spirit of spiritless conditions” and the opiate, not of the masses, but of the elites.

The Forward March of Statism

This realization is essential to understanding the forward march of statism in the United States. As Robert Bork describes in *Slouching Toward Gomorrah*: “The search for a ‘politics of meaning’ is a feature of modern liberalism, and reflects the human yearning for the transcendental by persons for whom religion no longer fills that need.” But he also observes that “politics as a transcendental value cannot be satisfied by the compromises of democratic processes.”

So how have the statist overcome our democratic processes, constitutional restraints, and historical distrust of state power? First, they have adopted a conscious strategy to pay us to value security over freedom. Second, they have manipulated our language. And third, they have used our law and our courts in ingenious ways to overcome popular will.

Valuing Security over Freedom

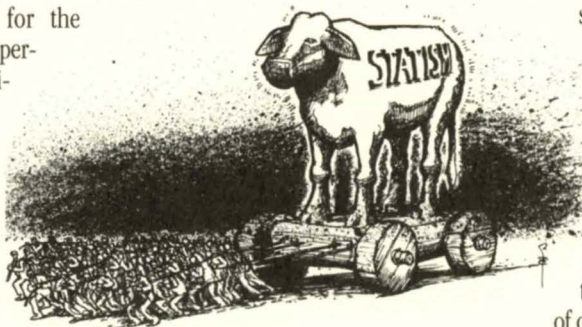
The first part of this strategy puts a new twist on an old fable about a kingdom and a tainted well: One of the king’s men bursts through the palace doors and rushes up to the throne. “Your highness,” he says, “the city well is tainted, and all who have drunk from it have gone mad. Your subjects are marching on the castle to demand your head. You must flee at once!” The king pondered this message for several moments and then made a startling move. He fetched water from the well and drank it himself. Thereafter, the mad king ruled his mad kingdom in perfect harmony. The story of statism in America is similar but reversed: The elites have drunk deeply from the well of political salvation, inducing visions of government-engineered utopia. The problem is that ordinary people do not understand, do not trust, and even fear such visions. The alleged solution is to give as many people as possible a taste of entitlement—to give everyone, as our president likes to say, “a stake in the system.”

The most dramatic bid toward this goal was the Clinton administration’s failed health care initiative. We all know that it sought policy advice from countries that had socialized medicine, but did you know it received political advice as well? Social Democrats in the German parliament advised that the surest path to becoming a permanent governing party was to socialize health care. Beyond placing another 10 percent of the GNP under government control, this would—for the first time—make a majority of Americans irrevocably dependent on the state.

What our statist had hoped to achieve was what the French economist Frederic Bastiat described when he said, “The state is that great fictitious entity by which everyone seeks to live at the expense of everyone else.” In statist terms, this is what is called “community,” and anyone who questions this equation is accused of opposing “shared values” and “the common good.”

Today, these accusations dominate the debate over Social Security reform, precluding any meaningful discussion of how to improve retirement security. Our current system was essentially introduced by the chancellor of Germany, Prince Otto von Bismarck, in 1889—twenty years before the first Model-T rolled off the tracks. It does not incorporate *anything* we have learned with regard to markets and investments over the past one hundred years. And yet any suggestion that the system might be improved through modernization, choice, and privatization is met by Luddite-like opposition.

In the recently released report by the government-appointed Social Security Advisory Council, Robert Ball (who started working for the government in 1939) argued against privatization on the following grounds: “Social Security is perhaps our strongest expression of community solidarity. Social Security is based on the premise that we’re all in this together, with everyone sharing responsibility not only for contributing to their own and their family’s security, but also to the security of everyone else, present and future.” A recent *New York Times* editorial put the issue even more bluntly. Privatizing Social Security, it complained, would treat people “as individuals.” Can you imagine?



Leave aside for a moment the vast empirical data demonstrating that privatization would improve retirement security, fuel economic growth, and make the system more fair. When opponents attack privatization because they fear it would weaken “community,” what they really fear is that it would take government out of the picture. The point, it would seem, is not to expand the pie of benefits for each individual retiree; the point is to keep the public piecutters employed.

Manipulating Language

When I listen to the lofty sentiments used to defend government redistribution, I reluctantly have to conclude that nowadays only criminals are honorable enough to steal without rhetorical excuses. Which brings me to statism’s second means of trying to outwit democracy: the manipulation of language.

We have entered an Orwellian era in which entitlement replaces responsibility, coercion is described as compassion, compulsory redistribution is called sharing, race quotas substitute for diversity, and suicide is prescribed as “death with dignity.” Political discourse has become completely corrupted. The reason is that if you tell people directly that you want to raise their taxes, transfer their wealth, count them by skin color, or let doctors kill them, most will object. Statists know this and therefore are obliged to obfuscate.

In one of the most striking examples, abortion is now discussed in terms of “reproductive health.” This sounds absolutely unobjectionable—who, after all, is opposed to health? The same thing goes for the term “pro-choice.” How can you be an American and be against choice? Both terms do an effective job of obscuring the real issue, which is life or death for an unborn child. Of course, this becomes a lot more difficult to do when the child in question is very near to being born. This is why advocates are so uncomfortable with the debate over partial-birth abortion. So brutal is this act that abortion advocates essentially refuse to discuss it. Vicki Saporta, executive director of the National Abortion Federation, says simply: “There is no such thing as a ‘partial-birth abortion’.... ‘Intact dilation and evacuation’ is an accepted medical technique.” I agree: there is no such thing as a

partial-birth abortion. In order to use the language properly, we must acknowledge that when a child is killed just moments before it can breathe its first breath, it is not abortion. The procedure Ms. Saporta so blithely describes is in fact nothing less than infanticide.

In his *Evangelium Vitae*, Pope John Paul II warned that by tolerating such practices, we have encouraged a “culture of death.” This is a world in which relationships are guided not by the Golden Rule, but by the Latin term *cui bono*—who benefits? In such a world, life is truly cheap, whether it is the homeless person we ignore on the street, the dying child in Bosnia, the elderly patient who needs medical care, or the tiny life within the womb. This is the inescapable conclusion of the modern conceit.

The statists would have you believe that their utopian dreams are evidence of a profoundly imaginative vision. But truly, what could be less imaginative than to think that if you can’t see it, touch it, or grasp it, then it doesn’t exist? Of course, there is a material order, but if there is no underlying natural order, and if the only such order that exists is the order we ourselves create, then life necessarily becomes cheapened, and we inter-

fere with decisions made by our Creator.

Overcoming Popular Will

In such a world, notions of right and wrong that have contributed to civilization’s painstaking progress over thousands of years are completely stood on their head. Without absolutes, what is right and what is wrong depends upon your point-of-view. The U.S. Constitution, for example, becomes what is fashionably referred to as a “living document,” to be reinterpreted as political expediency demands. This is the justification behind statism’s third avenue of assault.

Does anyone believe that, when it comes to defining the fundamentals of our democracy, modern lawmakers are more capable than Thomas Jefferson, George Washington, Alexander Hamilton, or James Madison? Why not? If the Constitution does not represent enduring truths, why should we give such weight to the words of these dead white males? Thanks to today’s leg-

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islative and judicial activism, we don't. We have largely abandoned the belief that the Constitution ought to be interpreted according to its original intent, and that is why the appointment of justices and judges has become one of the fiercest political struggles of our time.

This is convenient for those who want government to assume a role that neither the Constitution will sanction nor the electorate will approve. The real rise of state expansion through judicial fiat began with Franklin D. Roosevelt's attempt to pack the Supreme Court with six more members, a move that failed to change the Court's numbers, but forever changed its reading of the Constitution. If anyone doubts the intent, they should read the following excerpt from FDR's 1935 letter to the House Ways and Means Committee chairman: "I hope your committee will not permit doubts as to constitutionality, however reasonable, to block the suggested legislation."

As legal scholar Roger Pilon has pointed out, the fact that the framers intended limits to government power is made explicit by the Tenth Amendment: "The powers not delegated to the United States by the Constitution, nor prohibited by it to the States, are reserved to the States, respectively, or to the people." But where the

framers saw islands of government power in the sea of liberty, the New Dealers saw islands of liberty in a sea of government power. Over the past sixty years, the congressional and judicial tide has eroded those small islands of liberty to mere atolls.

We see the culmination of this trend in the ease with which today's courts override democracy whenever voters try to swim against the statist tide. As columnist George Will argues, "Having become unpersuasive, and hence uneasy in political arenas, liberalism dabbles in democracy but increasingly relies on litigation rather than legislation to achieve its ends." Witness California's Civil Rights Initiative. The language of CCRI was lifted almost word for word from the landmark 1964 Civil Rights Act, which stated: "No person in the United States shall, on the grounds of race, color, or national origin, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subject to discrimination under any program or activity receiving federal financial assistance." After citizens voted overwhelmingly to put an end to preferences, opponents forum-shopped for a sympathetic judge who blocked the new mandate, at least temporarily, on the Orwellian grounds that an end to prefer-

ential treatment violates constitutional guarantees of equality.

It was this type of whimsical interpretation of law that Justice Antonin Scalia commented upon when he asked: "What secret knowledge, one must wonder, is breathed into lawyers when they become justices of this Court? Day by day, case by case, [the Court] is busy designing a Constitution for a country I do not recognize."

The True Source of Freedom

America is a country many of us are finding increasingly difficult to recognize. *First Things* editor Richard Neuhaus asks whether we have arrived at "the end of democracy," and whether "we have reached or are reaching the point where conscientious citizens can no longer give moral assent to the existing regime." I share his concern, but I do not share

his pessimism.

Democracy is not at an end, but it is in the balance. If my voice is only a cry in the wilderness, so be it. But I am not going to curse the darkness; I am going to light a candle. If we are to change course, we must argue

with courage and conviction that there is a natural order. God is. The life He gives must not be taken away. The rights he endows must not be infringed. And humans, however well intentioned, must not seek to usurp the role of the Creator.

When the 19th-century French observer Alexis de Tocqueville peered into the fog of America's future, he said of its citizens: "I do not fear that they will meet with tyrants in their rulers but rather with guardians." A government led by such men, he said, "does not destroy, but it prevents existence; it does not tyrannize, but it compresses, enervates, extinguishes, and stupefies a people, till [they are] reduced to nothing better than a flock of timid and industrious animals, of which the government is the shepherd."

We must not confuse Tocqueville's government shepherd with the Good Shepherd. And we must remember that the true source of our security and our freedoms is not secular but spiritual. Until we recapture this truth, the relationship between the individual and the state will remain misshapen and we will continue to place the Golden Calf before the Golden Rule. ▲

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Remembering Great Men

Charlton Heston Actor, Director, and Author

Here are excerpts from Charlton Heston's presentation at the same January 1997 Shavano seminar in which this month's Imprimis author, Theodore J. Forstmann, participated. We hope you will agree that Mr. Heston provides valuable insight into the nature of leadership and the importance of recognizing and honoring the extraordinary.

Charlton Heston, recipient of the Academy Award for Best Actor for his performance in *Ben-Hur* in 1959, has also received many international acting and directing awards. He served six terms as president of the Screen Actors Guild, was chairman of the American Film Institute, and was a member of the National Council on the Arts. In 1978, he received the Jean Hersholt Humanitarian Award from the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. At the last Republican National Convention, he announced the formation of a new political action committee called Arena-PAC.



In December of 1990, *Imprimis* published his essay, "Reagan Was Right: Government Is the Problem." In 1995, Simon & Schuster released his autobiography, *In the Arena*. On Father's Day in 1997, his new book, *To Be a Man: Letters to My Grandson*, will be published. ♣

As the century closes, great men seem an endangered species. Indeed, in the minds of many, they are less than that; they are figments of our imagination. It's even been suggested that greatness is in itself...somehow undemocratic. We live, after all, in the century of the common man. True enough...but I believe in the uncommon man, perhaps because I've played so many of them.

Certainly, we have many good men...gifted men. God knows we have plenty of famous men. But that's not the same thing. Great men move the world not only by what they do in it but by what they tell us about it...Of all the great men I've had the good fortune to explore, the most towering, both in the record of his life and his impact on human history, was Moses—lawgiver to the Jews, warrior prophet of Islam for Muslims, and first among the prophets for Christians, the man of whom Christ said, "If ye believe Moses, so shall ye believe me."

Playing Moses marked my life. To assume the role of any great man is a daunting experience. Playing Moses, I felt like a tiny figure stretching to fill the giant shape he cut in the sky.

We began filming *The Ten Commandments* at the Monastery of St. Catherine on the lower slopes of Mt. Sinai. It is the oldest Christian monastery in the world. It contains the shrine of the burning bush, where God spoke to Moses from the fire. The monastery is also sacred to Muslims, because of their reverence for Moses. During the Crusades nine centuries ago, Christian knights on their way to Jerusalem to take the city from the Muslims rested there in perfect safety, knowing the Muslims would never attack the shrine of Moses. For the last two generations of conflict, that same truce has held, on that mountain only, between Jews and Arabs. That's how far the shadow of Moses reaches. He was flawed, as all of us are, but he still speaks to us as no other mortal has done.

One of the reasons Moses' voice is heard across the centuries is that he preached the powerful truth

that we are all brothers. But he realized that brotherhood is a condition that thrives best in times of hardship and danger. William Shakespeare—who knew more of the human heart than any man who ever lived—has an English king, Henry V, say to a tiny band of his countrymen on the eve of battle with an overwhelming French host:

We few, we happy few, we band of brothers; / For he today that sheds his blood with me / Shall be my brother: be he ne'er so vile, / This day shall gentle his condition.

Contemporary examples from the Persian Gulf War to Hurricane Andrew prove the same point. Americans cast in harm's way have joined together, regardless of rank, race, gender, or condition. Of course, Moses stood for something more important than brotherhood. Moses and the Exodus he led stood and still stand for *freedom*. For more than twenty-five centuries, he has inspired those who search for liberty. It's no

coincidence that the first tide of our Protestant forefathers in America bore the names from the Exodus: Moses and Aaron, Abraham, Joshua and Isaac. Two centuries later, generations of black American men bore those names, too, first searching for freedom, then celebrating it. In New England those same names are cut into the gravestones of our revolution. The words the Lord spoke to Moses before the Israelites crossed over Jordan, free at last, are cut in the rim of our Liberty Bell: "Proclaim liberty throughout all the land unto all the inhabitants thereof."

The instinct for freedom seems to be part of the human condition. Yet history tells us that freedom is fragile. I remember coming back from overseas

The American Dream is not success but liberty. Other countries have cherished this dream and lost it. Why have we been able to hold onto it? I think one reason lies in the vast richness of the land itself, that broad swell of continent between those shining seas.

in the sunny morning of victory at the end of World War II; we G.I.s thought freedom would soon spread around the whole world. The world would be free from war and tyranny. We were wrong. It was tyranny that prospered, for more than forty years. It's important to remember: there *was* an Evil Empire, there *was* a Cold War... and we won.

I don't know what the outcome of all the current world crises will be, but I do know that, like Moses, we must have faith and we must keep fighting for freedom, not just for ourselves but for all of the brotherhood of

man. Our country is still a shining example to the world: Men can live free. The American Dream is not success but liberty. Other countries have cher-

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ished this dream and lost it. Why have we been able to hold onto it? I think one reason lies in the vast richness of the land itself, that broad swell of continent between those shining seas.

From the very beginning, we were captivated by America. "We belonged to the land before the land was ours," Robert Frost wrote. Many of our poets, writers, and painters have tried to express this idea...to capture something of the spirit of our nation. While I was thinking of how I might do the same, I was flipping through a file of index cards where I'd copied some of my favorite quotations by great Americans. Spanning two centuries of our history, few of these men ever met, yet their words ring fresh and true today, as if spoken in a single voice:

I have a dream. I refuse to accept the end of man. I believe he will endure. He will prevail. Man is immortal, not because alone among God's creatures he has a voice but because he has a soul, a spirit capable of compassion, sacrifice, and endurance. Among America and Americans this is particularly true. It is a fabu-

lous country, the only fabulous country, where miracles not only happen, they happen all the time. As a nation we have, perhaps uniquely, a special willingness of the heart—a blind fearlessness—a simple yearning for righteousness and justice that ignited in our revolution a flame of freedom that cannot be stamped out. That is the living, fruitful spirit of this country. These are the times that try men's souls. The sunshine patriot and the summer soldier will in this crisis shrink from service. But he who stands and bears it now will earn the thanks of man and woman. With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us finish the work we are in. Let us bind up the nation's wounds. We must disenthral ourselves...and then we shall save our country. ▲

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