

The Nanny State

I would rather be exposed to the inconveniences of too much liberty than those attending too small a degree of it. – Thomas Jefferson

The nanny state is a consequence of officials believing the government must save people from themselves. Whether the issue is government-run healthcare or unhealthy foods, there is always a well-intentioned agenda behind the nanny state, and individual freedom is always in its way.

times sleep, his cupidity may at some point be satiated; but those who torment us for our own good will torment us without end, for they do so with the approval of their own conscience.⁵¹

Nanny state policies typically have their origins in the trivial. A given individual or group of people observe something that irritates them, so they fashion reasons why that something should be banned. These reasons can vary from individual health concerns to public safety concerns, but the people behind the campaigns usually manage to work children into the equation too. Approving policies “for the sake of the children” is an easy political sell.

Recommendation: Stop trying to save people from themselves. That is not the job of government, nor should it be.

When a nanny state do-gooder wants to ban a certain playground game from school yards to keep children from getting hurt, how does one oppose it without being accused of wanting children to get hurt? When a nanny statist proposes a ban on some unhealthy activity like smoking, how does one oppose it without being accused of *wanting* people to be unhealthy?

The simple answer to the nanny state mentality is that while safety and health are important, individual freedom, including the freedom to make bad decisions, is more important.

Good intentions - bad results

The nanny state is so pervasive because it often begins with the best of intentions. People who typically push nanny state policies are not consciously tyrants; they sometimes do legitimately want to help protect people from bad consequences like injury or illness. But, good intentions and noble motivations aside, those who push the nanny state are tyrants, whatever their intentions. As famed author C.S. Lewis explained:

Of all tyrannies, a tyranny sincerely exercised for the good of its victims may be the most oppressive. It may be better to live under robber barons than under omnipotent moral busybodies. The robber baron’s cruelty may some-

Example of the Nanny State

In North Dakota, legislation was proposed to outlaw alcohol inhalers, which are machines that vaporize alcohol so that it can be inhaled instead of imbibed. This legislation was proposed despite the fact that no such machine was known to be in use in North Dakota at the time. The vaporizing process of consuming alcohol removes the carbohydrates and calories from the alcohol and eliminates the "hangover" effect.

Supporters of the ban said that such machines would lead to greater amounts of intoxication, but according to testimony from Attorney General Wayne Stenehjem (himself an advocate of the ban) one would need to inhale vapors from the machine for 20 minutes before getting the same dosage of alcohol as a "shot." Since the typical shot of alcohol is swallowed in mere seconds, the inhaler is clearly not a faster way to get drunk.

So why was the ban proposed? Because some people just do not like it when other people are allowed to do what they want. Wherever there is a self-important busybody more concerned with people's personal business than his own, the nanny state exists. The bill was passed and it is now illegal to "sell, offer to sell, purchase, possess, use, or if the person is a retail alcoholic beverage licensee, have on the premises an alcohol without liquid device."⁵²

Freedom to make bad decisions

Being free means not just being able to make good decisions, but being able to make bad decisions as well. How can freedom exist when people are not able to make bad choices? Who decides which choices are good and bad, and why should any single authority making those decisions be trusted?

The nanny state is not an immediate threat to individual freedom and liberty; rather, it is a creeping and insidious threat. It is not born out of a revolution, but rather is crafted by will-intentioned, if misguided, do-gooders. It is, after all, not too difficult to identify a tyrannical leader. It is much harder to see the long-term threat from being told what to drive, how to light homes, what to eat and what to drink.

It is important to oppose regulations that micromanage the mundane details of one's lives, even if those laws present only a minor nuisance, for if people concede that such laws have validity, they concede in a small way that they are incapable of taking care of themselves. Eventually, they begin to invite government interference in all aspects of their lives, and soon they find themselves on a greased slope that slants into tyranny.


DID YOU KNOW?

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Think of how invasive and unpleasant an IRS audit is. Now imagine that same sort of government involvement in personal healthcare choices. Think of government bureaucrats using the power of law to tell people how to live their lives so that they are less of a burden to the agency's budget. When people invite the government to care for them in all these various ways, they also invite the government to begin dictating how they are to live their lives during the course of that "care."

The greatest allies of the nanny state are apathy and complacency. When fanatical health activists ban the use of salt in restaurants because it is unhealthy, some citizens say, "Oh well, I can still use salt at home." But every time one of these bans passes, individual freedom is lost. While these matters may seem small when taken individually, they add up quickly into a social and legal environment that is so restrictive, it is hardly in keeping with the ideals of liberty.



Most reasonable people would agree that eating McDonald's hamburgers every day is not the best lifestyle choice to make, but if making that choice makes someone happy and does not hurt anyone else, how can that pursuit of happiness be denied? Why should it be the responsibility of politicians to make him stop?

Responsibility comes with liberty. Many people in the United States are unwilling to admit that their obesity, ill-health, poor financial situation or any other negative is the result of their own poor decisions. To roll back the creeping threat of the nanny state, people must stand up to the infringement of their freedoms and rededicate themselves to individual liberty, even in seemingly trivial matters. Thomas Jefferson said it well. When the government is asked to get involved in the day to day lives of citizens, it is better to side with liberty, no matter how inconvenient it may be.