

Christian Reconstruction

Isaiah 61:4

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THE LOSS OF LEGITIMACY

by Gary North

So Jeroboam and all the people came to Rehoboam the third day, as the king had appointed, saying, Come to me again the third day. And the king answered the people roughly, and forsook the old men's counsel that they gave him; And spake to them after the counsel of the young men, saying, My father made your yoke heavy, and I will add to your yoke: my father also chastised you with whips, but I will chastise you with scorpions. Wherefore the king hearkened not unto the people; for the cause was from the LORD, that he might perform his saying, which the LORD spake by Ahijah the Shilonite unto Jeroboam the son of Nebat. So when all Israel saw that the king hearkened not unto them, the people answered the king, saying, What portion have we in David? neither have we inheritance in the son of Jesse: to your tents, O Israel: now see to thine own house, David. So Israel departed unto their tents (I Kings 12:12-16).

Rehoboam lost the kingship of Israel because he lost the trust of his people. He did not listen to them when they complained about the level of taxation. Instead of lowering taxes, he threatened to raise them. This caused a defection by the population, "when all Israel saw that the king hearkened not unto them." There is no question that civil government in the Hebrew republic was based on the covenantal consent of the people. When the people withdrew their consent to be governed by Rehoboam, his kingship fell. They shifted their allegiance to a new king, Jeroboam.

The issue here was legitimacy. Legitimacy is associated with moral order. The source of moral order is the god of a society. This god must manifest himself in all government, including civil government. The moral order of Israel was viewed by the people as being in conflict with Rehoboam and his counsellors. The people were no longer willing to subordinate themselves to the Davidic kingship. They transferred their allegiance to a new king who was seen as representing the original moral order.

The dividing issue was taxation. The government of Rehoboam was regarded as illegitimate because of the proposed imposition of new taxes. The State was digging too deeply into the wealth of the people. They understood that this was a violation of their rights as citizens. In response, they launched a successful political revolution (I Kings 12:19-20).

A Violated Boundary

Rehoboam had violated a boundary. He had forgotten that the State is not autonomous. It cannot impose any level of taxation that its representatives choose. If taxes exceed what people think is fair, they will seek ways to avoid paying. In this case, they went so far as to launch a revolution that divided the kingdom. This tax revolt led to the creation of a new nation with

a new priesthood.

Rehoboam had not recognized that he was about to cross a political boundary. He had imagined that the imposition of higher taxes was exclusively a matter of State authority. The State, he believed, was autonomous. It answered neither to God nor the people. He believed that as its spokesman, he possessed the authority to impose any level of taxation. He would use scorpions – extreme negative sanctions – to collect these proposed taxes. These sanctions would offset men's added resistance to taxes. He soon learned that the nation could impose negative sanctions on him. God forbade him to escalate these sanctions to preserve the kingdom (I Kings 12:21-24). He obeyed God. He allowed the ten tribes to take their lands and depart.

He had been warned not to violate this boundary. "And king Rehoboam consulted with the old men, that stood before Solomon his father while he yet lived, and said, How do ye advise that I may answer this people? And they spake unto him, saying, If thou wilt be a servant unto this people this day, and wilt serve them, and answer them, and speak good words to them, then they will be thy servants for ever" (I Kings 12:6-7). Had he served the people, he would not have lost his kingdom. But he believed that the people should serve him. In openly announcing this concept of political power, he forfeited the legitimacy his authority required to gain voluntary compliance.

Voluntary Compliance

Every government relies on a considerable degree of voluntary compliance. No government can afford to spend the resources necessary to compel all members under its authority to do what they do not want to do. If most men resist passively, the government cannot gain its stated goals. If even a large minority of men resist actively, a government will not achieve its stated goal. The government relies on income generated by those under its authority. If they cease paying, the government can no longer hire the sanctions-bringing agents who impose the State's will on those few participants who normally resist the government's authority.

The phrase "voluntary compliance" does not refer to a system that does not compel anyone to obey. It refers to a system that compels a few representative individuals to obey, with the negative sanctions brought against these resisters serving as a model for what happens to anyone who resists. This threat produces voluntary compliance. No sanctions are actually brought against every participant in order to gain his compliance. They are brought only against representatives. "Let this be a warning to you" . . . and everyone else.

When the System Fails to Deliver

To gain men's allegiance, there must be sanctions. These

sanctions are generally both positive and negative. (In biblical civil government, they are exclusively negative.) If the representatives of a civil government fail to persuade the citizenry that the costs of government pay off for citizens personally, the politicians create the environment leading to a loss of civil legitimacy.

A civil government that promises many benefits to voters risks their withdrawal of support if these promises do not come to pass. The political problem with the modern welfare State is that in bad times, politicians promise that the government will make things better, and in good times, they promise the same thing. The level of spending associated with the fulfillment of these promises constantly rises. The level of rhetoric associated with these promises also increases. Political discourse becomes focused on the ability of the State to fulfill its promises. The level of taxation required to enable the bureaucrats to fulfill the promises of the politicians constantly rises. When political rhetoric ceases to motivate the taxpayers, the end of legitimacy is in sight. When rhetoric shifts against the welfare State, the end is even nearer.

The government then faces resistance on two fronts. First, dependents on State welfare become addicted to ever-increasing levels of benefits. The State cannot meet these expectations. The dependents grow restless and disillusioned. The incumbents of the savior State have failed to deliver. Voters begin to search for other leaders to believe in. Second, politicians become addicted to ever-increasing levels of spending that the public's willingness to fund voluntarily does not match. This tempts them to violate the boundary that Rehoboam violated.

Because there are no limits to men's wants, there are no limits to calls for a greater commitment of State resources to meet these wants. There is no point on the political spectrum when every special interest group is placated. There is no point at which all would-be recipients of tax money announce, "We have received all we can spend. Give the taxpayers a break. Stop spending any additional money." At zero price, there is always more demand for money than supply of it – assuming that the monetary unit can be used for anything, including debt repayment.

The welfare State is therefore bound to fail. Its representatives cannot bring themselves to deny all of the special interest groups continual access to the public treasury. What brings down the welfare State is the voting public's loss of confidence that they, as individuals, will ever get back from the system what they will be called upon to put into it. This personal red ink scenario is guaranteed under the bankruptcy scenario. When the State cannot deliver on its promises because it has run out of money, it has reached the crisis point. It loses its moral legitimacy.

New Sources of Legitimacy

When the existing political order no longer commands the respect of most men, only fear will gain their compliance. This reduces the level of voluntary compliance; it also increases the costs of gaining compliance. The State must increase the number of visible representatives who become the victims of State sanctions. Or the severity of the sanctions must be increased. But this process has limits. When a growing minority of tax resisters in effect dare the State to find them, convict them,

and apply the sanctions, the State must respond by imposing dramatic sanctions. If it fails to do this, it cannot survive.

This is what happened to the Soviet Union in 1991. The military's loss of the war in Afghanistan called into question the myth of the invulnerable Soviet army. This in turn called into question the enforcement ability of the Soviet State. Coal miners struck the government and demanded higher wages. Instead of being sent to prison, they got their raises. This undermined Gorbachev's legitimacy. Soon thereafter, it undermined the entire Soviet State.

The Soviet Union became Russia when the enforcement arms of Marxism-Leninism could no longer compel acceptance of the dead faith. Two decades earlier, Solzhenitsyn had announced the death of the religion of Marxism. The intelligentsia had lost faith in the ideology that had long justified their tyranny, their legitimacy, their status, and their wealth. This loss of faith in their own cause among the intelligentsia was sufficient to doom the U.S.S.R., despite the fact that it commanded a huge army and offensive missile system.

The Russians are still in search of a legitimate hierarchy. The Czar is gone; the Communist Party no longer has majority support; the underworld is corrupt and exercises power by terror. The Russian State is disintegrating because of this loss of legitimacy. It took a major military defeat to bring down the U.S.S.R., coupled with economic bankruptcy. The economic suffering inside Russia is terrible.

The nation's boundaries have been altered by the changes. The nation's cities were renamed – a classic sign of the end of the old order. But what gives business to mapmakers undermines men's faith in their own past. They have lost faith in the vision of the future that had given legitimacy to this now-dead past. If they do not adopt a new vision of the future to replace the defunct one, their society is in desperate trouble.

Conclusion

The West's present order rests on a fragile foundation: fractional reserve banking, computers, telecommunications, the central government's ability to monitor men's transactions and command payment, and technological innovation. All of these would be called into question by a breakdown in the payments system. A breakdown in the world's computers could accomplish this almost overnight.

The free market rhetoric of Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan has helped to undermine the older faith in the welfare State. To this was added the collapse of the Soviet economy. Liberal intellectuals' faith in Marxism disappeared, 1989-1991. With it went a considerable amount of their faith in socialism. Keynesianism is also a fading religion. But nothing that is as morally compelling as the older socialism has replaced it. The would-be value-free speculations of free market economists has undermined eighteenth-century economics, which rested on a moral foundation.

This is why Christian economics is so important. It provides the moral framework necessary to gain men's allegiance. If the free market social order suffers a temporary breakdown, there will be a search for authoritative alternatives to Enlightenment social theory, whether left wing (Adam Weishaupt) or right wing (Adam Smith).

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