

Ever-expanding federal government stealthily constricting individual freedoms



My turn

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One of the clear messages of the Republican landslide of 1994 was that the public favors the downsizing of government. What is actually occurring is that government is becoming an ever larger part of our lives — like the stealth bomber, we may not see it at first, but it is there.

Some government policy makers and bureaucrats are working ever harder to ensure their share of the public purse string. A case in point is the Food and Drug Administration. In early 1995, the FDA was pledging to farm out activities that private agencies could do faster and more effectively and to eliminate regulation that add nothing to public health. Today, however, the FDA is demanding more regulatory powers, requiring a bigger budget and more employees.

David Keister, the FDA's commissioner, has proven to be an astute pilot of the stealth bomber, steering so that the public does not see where he's going. Keister, arguing that smoking among the young is a national disaster, calls for increased regulations and draconian penalties for selling and distributing tobacco products to

other adults. The more difficult tobacco is to obtain and the more conspicuous adults are of smoking youth, the greater the incentives for the young to smoke. In the Scandinavian nations of Norway, Sweden and Finland, youth smoking had been declining until they implemented total bans on tobacco advertising around 1980. Since then, smoking among the young has risen.

Why then is the FDA so aggressively pushing for increased regulations? Possibly because Keister is aware of public attitudes. The last election notwithstanding, in contrast to just a few decades ago, the public attitude today toward the government's involvement in its lives is much more benign. It is now taken for granted that it is the government's responsibility to decide who gets a multitude of goods and services — education, health, safety, jobs and welfare for instance.

In an annual survey conducted by the University of Chicago since 1975, the public has been found to increasingly believe the U.S. government should be involved in health care and that it is the government's responsibility to help with medical bills. Another poll found that 65

percent of Americans say that the federal government should bear responsibility for ensuring their company's pension funds; 70 percent say they would not feel safe at their workplace without Washington acting as a watchdog; 73 percent said that they would not feel safe taking a new drug without a clean bill of health from federal regulators; 75 percent said the same about day-to-day consumer products; 88 percent would not trust the water they drink and the air they breathe if the federal government did not control businesses; 84 percent wanted government to regulate TV programming; 66 percent said without the federal government, discrimination would be rampant; 75 percent said endangered species would be in far bigger trouble without government protection. (Arizona Republic, April 21, 1995, page B5).

Government in the United States has been a growth industry since 1930, there are now more people employed in government than there are in manufacturing. In 1929, government spending constituted less than 2.5 percent of total spending in the economy; it is now nearly 25 percent. The number of rules and regulations created by the government is so large that it is measured by the number of telephone-book-sized pages needed just to list them. The growth of government has led to an attitude that "someone else is responsible," a decline in personal responsibility; an increasing tendency to place blame for anything on someone else. We sue our employers because we are depressed; we sue a firm because we spilled coffee on ourselves; we sue our neighbor because we were not watching where we were going and we tripped; we sue our teachers because we were unwilling to work in school and thus did not learn; we sue the tobacco companies because we decided to smoke; and on and on.

The FDA is well aware of the public's attitude and has developed a strategy that is likely to lead to continued growth and power. The FDA's proposals won't reduce youth smoking, but they will further restrict individual freedoms. Beware of wise men offering foot's gold.

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