

*Consent is a journal of
ideas and opinions
on
individual freedom*



Consent

This article appeared in:
Consent #32, December 2001

Paved With Good Intentions

- Robert James Bidinotto

Mr. Bidinotto is a long-time contributor to **Reader's Digest** and **The Freeman**, and a lecturer at seminars sponsored by the **Foundation for Economic Education (FEE)**. The following essay originally appeared in **The Freeman** in February 1996.

Have you ever wondered why so many modern liberals seem to be immune to reason and evidence? Why --- despite the disastrous consequences of their various policies --- they remain intractably loyal to the same courses of action, and undyingly committed to repeating the same mistakes?

Well, could it be that the real-world consequences of their policies aren't even important to many statisticians? That they are pursuing their pet policies, not for any practical objectives, but for psychological ones?

Consider, for example, the reasons recently set forth for sending American troops to "keep the peace" in Bosnia. It was an instructive episode --- not in understanding international affairs, but in clarifying the motives that underpin the policy prescriptions of collectivists.

The idea that our nation's "vital interests" are at stake in the outcome of a civil war in an obscure part of Europe is ridiculous on its face. Likewise, the argument that America's "credibility" would be damaged by not fulfilling our international peacekeeping "commitments" to NATO, simply begs the question: why are we making open-ended commitments of our troops to international peace-keeping missions in the first place?

But another reason was advanced --- not a practical one, but a "moral" one. Slaughter of innocents was occurring in Bosnia, said the proponents of intervention; and stopping that slaughter was "the right thing to do."

In one national poll Americans indicated that they found all of the "practical" arguments unpersuasive --- but not this "moral" one. A slim plurality felt that our intervention was morally right.

Thus, American soldiers have once again been dispatched, at great risk, to intervene in a distant land. They are being sent not because of any rational argument, not because of any vital interests of ours at stake. They are being shipped off because such a mission makes a certain portion of the public, and liberal policy-makers, feel morally self-righteous.

These thoughts arise as I am reading Thomas Sowell's thought-provoking new book, *The Vision of the Anointed*. Whatever quarrels I may have with Dr. Sowell about his own "tragic vision" of the human condition, I nonetheless commend the volume to those who wish to grasp the psychological motives underpinning liberal policies.

Dr. Sowell makes the same basic point that I did in a March 1987 *Freeman* essay, "*The Morality of Good Intentions*." The subtitle of his book is: *Self-Congratulation as a Basis for Social Policy*. That is, the real-world consequences of their policies are far less important to many statisticians, than how the advocacy of such policies makes them feel about themselves. Simply put, "intentions [are] the touchstone of the vision of the anointed."

The point moves us, of course, away from the factual realm of rational analysis, and into the murky world of motivation. Under most circumstances, such a journey ought to be avoided. Issues should be argued on their own logical merits. Switching the arguments to the motives of the proponents of each side invites *ad hominem*s and subjective speculation.

But suppose one has exhausted rational argument? Suppose that, in the face of uncontested refutations and overwhelming evidence, one's adversary still remains stubbornly, irrationally wedded to his demonstrably false idea or failed policy? Suppose he meets your arguments not with factual rebuttal, but only with emotional outbursts --- and with his own speculative *ad hominem* attacks on your motives and morality?

Under such circumstances, the grounds of argument have been shifted by your adversary from the logical to the psychological. At that point, one has the right in self-defense to ask himself: What emotional need is my adversary's policy prescription filling?

Examples are legion. Start with the titles of most liberal legislation and government agencies. They are supposed to guarantee "social security," "health and human services," "environmental protection," "consumer product safety," "job training partnerships," and so on.

Do they accomplish these objectives? The evidence (Sowell's book alone provides mountains of it) says not. In most cases, these institutions are never even crafted with "feedback" mechanisms to gauge their success or failure.

But does demonstrable failure ever cause a moment's hesitation or reflection on the part of those advocating such policies, programs, and agencies? Never. That's because, for their advocates, the objective success or failure of the program is beside the point.

The point, for the advocates, is that they have demonstrated their moral commitment to social security, environmental protection, peace, or other vague, noble-sounding objectives. The point is not practical results: it's instead the self-congratulatory objective of making themselves feel noble and righteous, but the cheap expedient of spending the capital --- and too often, the blood -- of their fellow citizens, in the name of woozy ideals.

For example, interventionists proclaim their aim to raise the income of poor, inner-city youth via minimum wage laws. But do they seem concerned when minority unemployment subsequently rises? They declare their support of rent control to allow the poor greater access to affordable housing. Do they ever seem concerned when the available stock of housing dramatically shrinks? They announce their intention to relieve starvation in Somalia by sending in our Marines to stop civil unrest and feed the people. Do they vow to cease such self-sacrificial missions in the future, when the only evident results are the empowerment of brutal warlords, and the return of our soldiers in body bags? No: they vow to repeat the same sort of "mission" in Bosnia.

For those who base their self-esteem on "good intentions" alone, a social system of laissez-faire capitalism and individual rights offers nothing. Capitalism is a social system whose currency is results, not intentions. "It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker, that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest," wrote Adam Smith. "We address ourselves, not to their humanity but to their self-love, and never talk to them of our own necessities but of their advantages." This is anathema to those whose self-images totter shakily upon the props of their subjective intentions.

"The vision of the anointed," as Sowell describes it, ultimately depends upon self-inflicted blindness to practical consequences. For by that standard, they --- and their policies --- stand condemned.

CONSENT is published by Freedom Party International. Editor: Robert Metz.

Consent welcomes unsolicited manuscripts, submissions, cartoons, quotes, and comments.

Opinions expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect the policies of any political party officially recognized by Freedom Party International.

TO ORDER BACK-ISSUES OF CONSENT,
or simply to request more information about Freedom Party, please call or write:

Freedom Party International, P.O. Box 2214, London, Ontario, Canada N6A 4E3.

Telephone: 519-681-3999; **Toll Free:** 1-800-830-3301.

Office Address: 240 Commissioners Road West, London, Ontario, Canada N6J 1Y1.