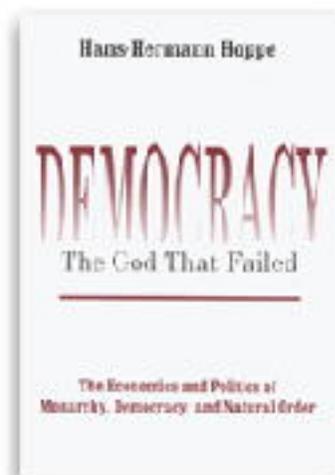


## What Do We Owe the State?

by [Joseph Sobran](#)

I've had a lot of response to my column on Hans-Hermann Hoppe's new book [Democracy – The God That Failed](#), most of it enthusiastic. [See the column of December 20, 2001, "The Myth of 'Limited Government'."] A surprising number of citizens of this democracy have lost faith in the state, democratic or otherwise.



It's amazing how seldom we ask the most basic questions. What is a state, anyway? Where does it get its authority? Might we be better off without it?

These are serious questions. One scholar estimates that during the twentieth century, states murdered about 177 million of their own subjects. And that doesn't count foreigners killed in wars. In order to justify their own existence, states had better be doing someone a lot of good, or be able to show that in the absence of states, even more people would have been slaughtered. Neither proposition is credible.

"Wait a minute," someone will say. "You're mixing apples and oranges. Sure, there are bad states, like the Soviet Union, which murder millions. But there are also good states, which don't murder people and which protect their people from bad states."

Well, it's possible that a mildly rapacious state may afford us some protection against a much worse one, just as one neighborhood gang may offer safety against another. But all states are rapacious, almost by definition.

What is a state? It is the ruling body in a territory, which claims a monopoly of the legal right to command obedience. It may demand anything – our earnings, our services, our lives. Once the right to command is conceded, there are no limits on its power.

Many people think a state is a natural necessity of social life. They can hardly conceive of society without the state.

This would be plausible if the state confined itself to enforcing natural moral obligations – that is, if it protected us from robbery, murder, and the like, otherwise leaving us alone. But what if the state itself robs and murders, claiming the authority to do so?

Any two men will usually agree that neither may justly take the other's property or life. Nor does either owe the other obedience; that would be slavery. But somehow the state claims what no individual may claim – a right to the lives, property, and obedience of all within its power. The state asserts its "right" to do things that would be wrongs and crimes between private men. And most people accept this claim! They think they have a moral duty to obey power!

So why do people think they have this duty? Of course, as the philosopher Thomas Hobbes argued, the state ultimately rests on its power to kill (or otherwise harm) those who disobey it. But this is a threat, not a duty. If I demand your money at gunpoint, you will obey, but the gun doesn't create an obligation, merely a menace.

But the state pretends that all its demands, however arbitrary, are moral obligations, even though those demands rest on force. If it were confined to demanding only what decent people do anyway – refraining from murder, robbery, et cetera – it might be bearable. But it never stops with reasonable moral demands; at a minimum, even the most "humane" and "democratic" states use the taxing power to extort staggering amounts of money from their subjects. The predatory tendency of the state is inherent and expansive, and nobody has found a way to control it. No control can long withstand the monopolistic "right" to demand obedience in every area of human activity the state may choose to invade. Systematized force – which is all the state really is – follows its own logic.

Legal forms, moral rhetoric, and propaganda may disguise force as something it is not. The idea of "democracy" has persuaded countless gullible people that they are somehow "consenting" when they are being coerced. The real triumph of the state occurs when its subjects refer to it as "we," like football fans talking about the home team. That is the delusion of "self-government." One might as well speak of "self-coercion" or "self-slavery."

No, the state, now grown to a monstrous magnitude, remains what Albert Jay Nock called it: "our enemy, the State." Maybe Professor Hoppe is dreaming. Maybe anarchism couldn't be sustained. Maybe the evil of systematized force can never be eliminated in this fallen world. But why pretend such an evil is a positive good?

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