

## It's a Rough World

*By Carl S. Milsted, Jr.*

Some of you may have noticed that I have been less frequent of late in writing essays for this column. There is a reason for this: a couple of months ago I had the good fortune to get married. As such, I have been spending less time writing these columns and more time on other things...such as woodworking.

Like many a typical libertarian, I had piles of books, magazines and papers scattered about the house, organized Zen-like in apparent chaos, yet actually utilizing my spatial memory to keep track of multiple projects. Such is not acceptable after marriage. So I have been at the task of making shelves -- not just any shelves, but shelves that actually look nice; bachelor quality will no longer suffice. This requires hours of work with sandpaper and steel wool.

There is an intersection between woodworking and writing, however. Repetitive work such as sanding causes the mind to wander, and wander in the fashion of the poets and sages of yore. That is, the mind takes lessons from unconnected phenomena and builds metaphors to express those lessons.

Such work teaches a harsh lesson: start with too fine a grade of sandpaper and you will fail to take out the roughest parts of the wood. Instead, you will smooth the tops of the ridges while leaving rough valleys underneath. But if you do start with coarse sandpaper, you will make the areas that are already smooth *rougher*. But it is best to use the coarse paper anyway, for you can take out that roughness with the finer papers, and the overall results will be far better – and quicker. Delayed gratification means bigger gratification sooner.

There is a lesson here for Libertarians. The path to liberty does mean advocating the use of The State in the intermediate term. To fail to do so is to fail to win office and effect any changes. The transitional measures are important.

For example, talk of federal tax cuts is premature. The government has \$7 trillion in debt to pay off. This money has already been spent or committed. Even with some massive cuts in discretionary spending, we still need to keep taxes high in order to begin to pay down the interest-bearing debt and to prepare for the retirement of the Baby-Boomers. This is not pleasant, but if it is not done, futures taxes will be *higher*. We can productively talk about simpler taxes – including taxes that we find unacceptable in the long run – but lower federal taxes are a dream for the future.

Or consider recreational drugs. One of the better arguments for legalizing them is that the government can make a bunch of money taxing them. It is good to make this argument even though it does involve advocating a tax. Yes we are making scratches, applying our metaphor, but we are getting rid of a really bad jagged area. We are replacing needless incarceration, clogged courts, the destruction of the Bill of Rights, and funding of terrorism by advocating a new tax. I even go as far as to suggest that marijuana should be sold in state-owned liquor stores. I am *against* privatizing state-owned liquor stores for states that have them for two reasons: (1) many people are more likely to trust them than privately owned stores for selling marijuana to adults only, and (2) it might be easier to deal with the federal government, since the feds must actually arrest a state government.

Or consider education. Vouchers do mean government spending and even government manipulation of private schools. Even so, they are a huge step toward liberty, and should be

advocated. Later, we can argue for privatization of even the vouchers. Today, the idea of educating the poor with charity is unthinkable to most.

Or consider Iraq. It is all well and good to say we should never have gone there, but we are there now. It is time for constructive suggestions, not history lessons. What do we have in our corpus of ideas that might apply in Iraq? How about our recognition that democracy is not a panacea? Perhaps Iraq should be split into multiple countries. This may make the U.N. unhappy, but when did Libertarians care what the U.N. thinks?

It is time to set priorities. Which laws are the worst? What can we do to fix them the most quickly, taking into account political reality? Once we have done this, we can move on to the next level of refinement.