

*AGAINST LEVIATHAN: GOVERNMENT POWER AND A FREE SOCIETY.* BY ROBERT HIGGS. OAKLAND, CALIF.: THE INDEPENDENT INSTITUTE, 2004.

When I was a youngster, I used to anxiously await the “greatest hits” album of my favorite rock groups. Now, such productions created win-win situations for everyone involved. The members of said rock groups did not have to create any new songs or make another trip to the recording studio. Those of us who purchased the albums could listen to all of the songs we *really* liked without having to put up with some of the flip side pieces that never made the hit parade.

Robert Higgs may not be a rock star, and his newest book *Against Leviathan* is not set to music, but it does seem to be something akin to his “greatest hits,” in this case being his “greatest essays.” *The Best of Bob Higgs*, as I have renamed this book, is a great read, as well it should be, given that Higgs is one of the best—if not the best—economic historian in the business today. The author of the landmark *Crisis and Leviathan* (1987) has hit another home run.

Higgs writes in the way that good economists used to write, which means that while his work is not exactly like reading the latest issue of *Newsweek*, neither is it that math-encrusted nonsense that is the regular staple of “elite” economics journals. Instead, Higgs gives us a series of very readable essays he has published over the years which deal with a wide range of subjects from the Civil War to the present set of debacles that seems to be the staple of the present U.S. regime in power.

At the start of his remarkable career, Higgs was what one might call a “mainstream” economist. That is, he bought into the various neoclassical models that he learned in graduate school (and that those of us who have endured graduate school also have learned), which see the world as being in states either of perfect or imperfect competition. Within this world, market failures abound, as firm after firm faces the dreaded downward demand curve. To right this series of wrongs, government is required to intervene and force these recalcitrant monopolists to set prices at marginal costs in the name of justice *and* efficiency. (The exception is made for “natural monopolists,” who must set their prices at average costs in order for truth and justice to prevail.)

Sometime during his career, Professor Higgs was able to shake off this set of beliefs and adopt something closer to the beliefs of Murray Rothbard in his heyday. Chapter 14 begins this way:

When I was younger and even more ignorant than I am today, I believed that government (understood conventionally as a monopoly of legitimate coercive force in a given territory) performs an essential function—namely, the

protection of individuals from the aggressions of others, whether those others be compatriots or foreigners—and that no other institution can perform this function successfully. Indeed, I once wrote a book whose very first sentence reads, “We must have government.” In this belief, I was merely plodding along the path of the great unreflective herd, although, to be sure, many philosophers, social scientists, and other deep thinkers have reached the same conclusion. Growing older, however, has given me an opportunity to reexamine the bases of my belief in the indispensability of the protective services of government (again, as conventionally understood). As I have done so, I have grown increasingly skeptical, and I am now more inclined to disbelieve the idea than to believe it. More and more, the proposition strikes me as almost preposterous. (p. 101)

In the twentieth century (or at least until 1985), Higgs notes, governments killed approximately 170 million people who lived within their own borders. (He then adds another 40 or so million who have perished in wars.) In other words, instead of protecting life, liberty and property, as the “proper role” of government is supposed to be, we have governments going on murderous rampages against their own citizens. Furthermore, as Higgs artfully points out, such episodes of murder are not limited to those “rogue” governments such as those that governed Germany during the 1930s and 40s, or the U.S.S.R. for more than 70 years. No, the “enlightened” and “democratic” regime of the United States of America has engaged in its own escapades of murder and mayhem going on for two centuries.

After citing a litany of atrocities carried out from Washington, D.C., including the firebombing of residential neighborhoods in Germany and Japan during World War II, Higgs asks the obvious: “Might it be that government itself is the root of the evil?” (p. 102) Anticipating the response that one typically might hear from someone who is asked this question, Higgs writes:

But without government, the familiar refrain goes, we would be plunged into anarchy—understood conventionally as violent chaos, a Hobbesian war of all against all. Nothing, it is widely assumed, could be worse than the situation that would exist without government (as we know it). Notice, however, that this supposition is just that—a mere supposition. Can we really imagine that the world’s people, absent governments to organize and goad them on, would have been so obtuse and antisocial that they would have ended up slaughtering more *than 210 million* of one another in the twentieth century before coming to their senses? Such a vision of haphazard violence boggles the mind. (Emphasis author’s, pp. 102–03)

A person writing a treatise on “good government” is not going to ask such a rhetorical question. For that matter, it is obvious that Higgs considers “good government” to be something akin to the mythical unicorn; we might recognize “good government” if we were to find it, but it is quite doubtful that such a beast exists anywhere. Thus, if one believes—as does Higgs and perhaps many readers of the *QJAE*—that the view that government is needed to protect individuals, not to mention “solve” the problems caused by “imperfect” competition is utterly flawed, then this book will both entertain and inform.

The 40 chapters of this book are short enough that each can be read in a single sitting. (Actually, the book is interesting enough to be read in a single sitting—if one wishes to sit all afternoon or night.) From Higgs’s insightful perspectives on the Progressive Era to his dissection of U.S. trade policy (“When my son was growing up, I

lived in constant fear that one day he would come to me and ask, ‘Dad, why do we have an Export-Import Bank?’” [p. 145]), he demonstrates that he has few peers when it comes to understanding and articulating the predations of the Leviathan State.

*Against Leviathan* would be an excellent companion reader for any economics class that deals with policy, and especially a class on regulation and the relationship between government and business. Indeed, any student or faculty member who has an interest in economics would benefit from reading this book that artfully and skillfully explodes the various myths of why government really is good for us.

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