

Twight, Charlotte A. *Dependent on D.C.: The Rise of Federal Control Over the Lives of Ordinary Americans*. New York: Palgrave, 2002.

Consider the standard left-wing account of twentieth century American politics. Capitalism, we're told, is at root an efficient but amoral engine of wealth creation. Its efficiency, however ostensibly wonderful, merely disguises its deep moral failings—its conducivity to greed, its contribution to inequality, its failure to meet human needs. The basic function of a government is to remedy those failings, to use redistributive taxation, regulation and moral suasion to secure “the general welfare.” Naturally, the major obstacles to progress have come from those inscrutable right-wing folk who would put roadblocks in the way of an expansive and activist government. The basic task of politics is therefore to combat them.

This view of things is the reigning account of American politics, going uncontested in pedagogy, scholarship, the mass media, and everyday political discussion. In *Dependent on D.C.*, Charlotte A. Twight undertakes the daunting task of challenging it from a perspective that is practically its mirror-image. On her view, far from being the dominant agent of progress, the government (and especially the federal government) has by and large stood in the way of progress, and made us dependent on the barriers to progress it has set up. Nor has this been a matter of trading independence for just or efficient solutions to our problems; on the contrary, we have relinquished our independence from the government for compulsory dependence to it, getting nothing of comparable value in return.

Dependent on D.C. consists of a series of case studies describing how the federal government fostered dependency in the twentieth century, what the results were, and how it increased the costs of resistance to its policies to guarantee its possession of power. Twight begins the first two chapters with a brief synopsis of her basic assumptions. Her normative starting point is a classical liberal or libertarian political vision; her explanatory framework is that of Public Choice economics, which examines government action from the perspective of the self-interested (or apparently self-interested) motivations of its functionaries, principally legislators and bureaucrats. Chapters 3-8, the heart of the book, examine specific federal policies, arguing that the history of these policies can be explained by recourse to the same “universal tactic”: each policy began by fostering public dependence on the government while simultaneously raising the costs of resistance to such dependence, thereby entrenching the policies and making it impossible to escape from them. Chapter 9 ends simultaneously on a hortatory and pessimistic note, enjoining readers to resist government-fostered dependency, but predicting that few will successfully take up the challenge.

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Dependent on D.C. is in many respects an insightful and valuable book; its theme is certainly an important one, and its thesis is in many respects

true. American politics today is increasingly driven by the view that every problem that anyone ever faces in life—from the price of gas to the language used in the workplace—is the thin wedge of a larger “crisis that demands a massive and sustained federal response” (to paraphrase the Kerner Commission report). Two correlative assumptions stand behind this view of the world: (a) that freedom causes social problems, and (b) that force fixes them. Classical liberals often respond to this view of politics by engaging in laborious analyses of particular government policies, marshalling textbook economics to show that a given policy (say, the minimum wage) achieves the opposite of its stated intentions, and exacerbates whatever problem it was intended to solve. This piecemeal approach, while valuable in the most egregious cases, does little to challenge the more general assumptions about freedom and force that drive political discourse. Twight’s book provides the resources for that broader critique: her book aims to show its readers, both in detail and quite generally, not only that government is the source of certain large-scale problems, but how it became so. In my view, Twight makes her strongest case vis-à-vis Social Security (chapter 3), public education (chapter 5), and health care policy (chapter 6). Even cynical readers will be amazed at the sheer distance between the left-wing hagiographies invoked to justify these programs and the actual histories behind them.

The chapter on public education is perhaps the most convincing in the book. Mainstream political discourse proceeds from the assumption that public education is a necessary condition of universal literacy and numerosity, and that without it, these values would be impossible to achieve. The view is almost never argued for and almost never challenged, and thus enjoys the undeserved status of an axiom of social policy. Its axiomatic status protects public schooling from any fundamental criticism while also functioning to conceal the fact that while public schools today do a questionable job of imparting literacy or numerosity, they do a great job of inculcating students in the worldview of left-liberalism (136). Twight focuses on this latter issue—indoctrination—to present a refreshingly radical critique of public education.

“The fight over public education,” she writes, “has always been a fight over who will shape the minds and character of the next generation...In law if not in the hearts and minds of many American parents, the central government has emerged victorious in that protracted struggle” (133). The details emerge over the course of the chapter, as Twight shows us how, throughout the twentieth century, American public education has been driven by fads and trends formulated by political animals entirely out of touch with the realities of pedagogical life. More importantly, as the branch of the activist state most explicitly devoted to the dissemination of ideology, public schools have served as a remarkably effective way of subverting limited government. From an early age, students learn that government—and especially the federal government—is the principal guarantor of their well-being and the most important institution in society. Consequently, they learn to put their faith in it, whatever the status of “under God” in the Pledge of Allegiance. Every well-

educated child today believes that racism and sexism require anti-discrimination laws, that diversity is an overridingly important social good, that we need the EPA to protect the environment, that equal access to health, education, and welfare are basic human rights, and that each of us owes a duty of service to “society.” By contrast, few are expected to learn the rudiments of a classical liberal conception of political economy, even as an antiquarian exercise, and few ever encounter one by happenstance. Naturally, such students are primed to support the mixed economy for the rest of their lives: totalitarianism aside, they can hardly imagine alternatives to it.

Anyone doubting this is invited to spend some time studying the most recent versions of the Civics, Geography, and U.S. History exams given by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) at the fourth-, eighth- and twelfth-grade levels (go to <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard>). The exams reveal in detail what the federal government expects young people to know in each of those subjects at each of those grade levels—nothing radically left-wing, to be sure, but very almost nothing congenial to classical liberalism. In this respect, NAEP’s pedagogical expectations orbit comfortably around the Democratic-Republican consensus that governs our political life (leaning mostly to the Democratic side). Anyone who remains in doubt is invited to spend some time defending classical liberalism in the classrooms of America’s public schools. Such a person will quickly come to learn that the principal obstacle to defending classical liberalism in such a setting is the setting itself: it is extraordinarily difficult to convey the meaning of freedom to people who, having been subtly taught the “virtues” of redistribution and regulation for twelve years, unwittingly believe that their well-being depends on government largesse and control over the economy. Twilight is shrewd enough to see how public schools inculcate such beliefs, and courageous enough to attack them for it (all the more so because she’s biting the monopolistic hand that feeds her). She ends the chapter with a series of apt quotations from authors critical of government schools. The quotations from John Stuart Mill are especially apt: few people remember that Mill was home-schooled, and fewer still remember his criticisms in *On Liberty* of the very idea of public education.

The chapter on Social Security hits the spot as well. Mainstream debate on Social Security is driven by the assumption that the program deserves to exist; the consuming question for Republicans and Democrats alike is how to “save” it. To her credit, Twilight rejects this assumption, challenging the legitimacy of the program as such, and identifying the blatant (and characteristically middle-class) mendacity that lies behind it. In the simplest terms, Social Security is a welfare program for people who haven’t figured out that human beings eventually reach old age and must therefore find a way for providing for themselves when they can no longer work. To hide this altogether obvious fact from its beneficiaries—in other words, to give middle-class people a way of differentiating themselves from stereotypical welfare recipients—the government puts on a great show of making Social Security seem to be something that it obviously is not, namely, an insurance policy. But

as Twight points out, there's no such thing as an insurance policy that you don't voluntarily purchase, that you pay for but never own, and that was explicitly designed to supplant would-be competitors by force of law (72). Social Security is therefore not just a monumentally expensive middle-class welfare program, but one based on monopoly and fraud, and not just that, but a racket that has actively destroyed the foundations of a real market in old-age insurance.

Though I think Twight misses certain important dimensions of the health care debate—e.g., the ideological centrality of the idea of a *right* to health care—she does a good job in conveying the frankly totalitarian nature of contemporary health care policy. Her account of its rigid and irrational taxonomies (188-95, 215-218) and its criminalization of independent judgment (218-220) make for especially grim reading. One of the particular merits of her discussion is her astute observation that we are not currently headed toward “socialized medicine” but toward “a neutered private system” in which the government “will continue its systematic quest to capture control of our nominally private market system” (192). This insight, I think, is the key to virtually every health care problem we currently face (e.g., HMOs); I wish that Twight had given it more sustained attention.

Despite its undeniable strengths, I had some misgivings about *Dependent on D.C.* A first problem is the absence of any explicit account in the book of what Twight takes to be the proper function of government. The title of the book, as well as much of its text, seems to suggest that the sheer fact of being “dependent” on the federal government is in and of itself a bad thing. But unless we take the Articles of Confederation or anarchy as our model, that can't be right. The federal government is after all a legitimate institution, and if so, *some* degree of dependency on it is not just predictable but desirable. What's wrong is not dependency as such, but dependency of a certain kind. We would expect a careful writer, then, to distinguish between legitimate and illegitimate forms of dependency on the government. Unfortunately, Twight fudges this issue: “I start with the premise, now embraced across a broad political spectrum by persons of widely divergent ideologies, that the federal government is today operating far outside the bounds of most people's concept” of its core functions (8). I doubt that any such consensus exists, and even if it did, I doubt that any majority of its members would find Twight's argument convincing. In any case, I find the strategy oddly circuitous. Twight's argument throughout the book proceeds from classical liberal political premises. Why not just admit that fact and proceed from there? A commitment to limited government is hardly something to hide.

This relatively theoretical point affects the plausibility of some of Twight's case studies. For instance, Twight devotes chapter 4 to a lengthy critique of federal income tax withholding, objecting to what she sees as its totalitarian methods. As she points out, federal income tax is withheld from our paychecks on an incremental basis, rather than being paid in a single lump

sum. If we pay taxes gradually, she suggests, we're more easily deceived into thinking that we're not actually paying anything at all, which makes it easier to part with the money.

I'm no fan of our tax system, but I don't buy this argument. For one thing, I don't see any significant difference between incremental withholding and a lump-sum payment. The fact is, if you ultimately have to pay x to the government, you're going to have to pay x whether you do so in one lump sum, or over a year's worth of withholdings. Either way, you pay. Moreover, I find Twight's argument psychologically implausible. Contrary to Twight, aren't we *more* apt to be conscious of the burdens of taxation if we see its results written out on our paychecks every two weeks? An annual lump-sum payment could be paid and forgotten each year, but it's harder to forget what happens every payday. Finally, Twight's analysis is politically implausible as well. Almost every political campaign in America is about lower taxes. Walter Mondale's ill-fated presidential campaign should be enough to convince us that higher taxes are not exactly the road to political success in America. So it's hard to believe that the transaction costs of reduced taxes are as high as Twight makes them out to be.

The problem with Twight's discussion of taxation, I think, is its misplaced sense of normative priorities. As Robert Nozick pointed out decades ago, the fundamental normative issue concerning taxation is not its method but its goal (Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*, [New York: Basic Books, 1974], p. 27). And the basic cause for complaint against our tax system is not *how* we're taxed (or even *how much* we are), but *why* we are: what's objectionable is the fact that the system robs Peter to pay Paul, not that it robs Peter on a biweekly rather than annual basis. In the absence of any explicit account of the function of the state, Twight misses this crucial distinction, devoting too much space to issues of peripheral importance.

Problems also arise in Twight's discussion of law enforcement issues in chapter 7 of the book. The problem here is nicely described by Alexander Hamilton in *Federalist* #1:

An enlightened zeal for the energy and efficiency of government [is often] stigmatized as the offspring of a temper fond of despotic power and hostile to the principles of liberty...[It is often] forgotten that the vigor of government is essential to the security of liberty; that in the contemplation of a sound and well-informed judgment, their interests can never be separated.

Twight commits this fallacy in spades. She frequently writes, as too many libertarians do, as though law enforcement were a self-executing endeavor without significant demands of its own. From this perspective, a writer's only task is to criticize the blunders of law enforcement officials—never to look at the larger picture, and never to praise the government for getting anything right. Thus she rarely sees things from the perspective of government agents who have to enforce *legitimate* laws in the face of unscrupulous or dishonest citizens, focusing entirely on the evil that

government does when it enforces illegitimate laws. This is particularly the case when she discusses the topic of fraud. Reading her scathing remarks about government anti-fraud provisions, I found myself wondering whether Twight was criticizing the deficiencies of particular laws—or defending a citizen’s “right” to engage in dishonest financial transactions with impunity (103-4, 124, 238-9, 248-53). It bears repeating, perhaps, that a classical liberal government is one that prohibits both force *and* fraud.

Twight also has a tendency to write as though law enforcement officials were nothing but B-movie villains intent on violating rights at their whim and caprice. The most egregious example of this attitude is her treatment of the notorious incident at Waco, Texas in February-April 1993. The incident began on February 28, 1993, when members of the Federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms (BATF) attempted to serve a search warrant at the compound of a Seventh-Day Adventist religious order called “the Branch Davidians” on suspicion that the Davidians were in violation of federal weapons statutes. A shootout began as federal agents invaded the Davidians’ grounds and building; the shootout ended in stalemate, with four federal agents and six Davidians dead. A siege followed, during which the FBI replaced the BATF and took command of operations. After much fruitless negotiation between the FBI and the Branch Davidians, the FBI tear-gassed and demolished the Davidians’ compound, which simultaneously caught fire, killing 76 of its occupants (many of them children), and ending the siege. (The causes of the fire are vehemently disputed, but good evidence suggests that the Branch Davidians started it.) Eleven of the surviving Branch Davidians were put on trial for having fired on the BATF agents on the first day of the affair; they were all acquitted of murder, but eight were found guilty of a (confusing) variety of lesser charges. The trial was problematic at best, and it remains unclear who fired the first shot on February 28.

The Waco affair is a much-neglected event in modern American history, and we can agree with Twight that the government was guilty of considerable malfeasance on that occasion—malfeasance that bears further reflection and discussion than it’s gotten in the years since. But Twight isn’t content to rest there. There is, she writes, “overwhelming evidence” of “brutal government murder” at Waco (309). The Waco incident thereby becomes the modern-day equivalent of “the U.S. government’s treatment of Native Americans” in the nineteenth century. We’re therefore invited to infer that the federal government of the United States is a genocidal institution, guilty of vast crimes against humanity, and undeserving of the slightest shred of respect.

If the evidence for “mass murder” at Waco were really “overwhelming,” one would expect Twight to produce it right there in the text. After all, an accusation of murder against specific individuals—the FBI and BATF agents in charge of the Waco operation—is hardly the kind of thing that one can toss off without substantiation. But Twight offers nothing resembling substantiation, serving up the lame excuse that “no summary can convey” the evidence for her inflated claims. Such evidence as she does present is buried in

a footnote, and consists of one book and two films (404n.125). No one familiar with the material she cites there (or familiar with the facts) could possibly regard them as telling the whole story, much less as presenting “overwhelming evidence” of “mass murder.” To make matters worse, the book she cites explicitly *denies* that the evidence it presents is conclusive, and explicitly *denies* that the available evidence points to mass murder (David B. Kopel and Paul H. Blackman, *No More Wacos: What’s Wrong with Federal Law Enforcement and How to Fix It*, [Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1997], pp. 13 and 201-11, respectively.) Nor does Twilight mention the findings of Senator John Danforth’s “Final Report to the Deputy Attorney General” (2000) concerning the Waco affair, which takes detailed and explicit issue with the very charges she makes in her book (and with what is alleged in the films she cites). My point is not that Danforth’s report is unerringly right, but that Twilight’s failure to mention it, much less rebut it, is irresponsible. In fact, her handling of the Waco issue is problematic enough to create doubts about the book as a whole. If this is the way she handles Waco, one wonders, could she be taking similar liberties with facts elsewhere in the book? I hope not, but I can’t say for sure.

There is, finally, a deficiency in the book’s handling of the role of ideology in the making of public policy. As Twilight tells the story, ideological factors are an epiphenomenon of public policy rather than its driving force: they make an appearance only at the tail-end of the story. On her view, bad policies arise for reasons that don’t need explanation. Once they do arise, rent-seeking and power-lusting politicians manipulate the public into accepting these policies, raising the transaction costs of challenging and undoing them. Consequently, and at the tail end of this process, the public starts to receive the largesse from the policies, which puts the policies in a better light, and thereby breaks resistance to them.

This model leaves too much unexplained. For one thing, it fails to explain where the bad policies came from in the first place. Why *were* people receptive to public education, Social Security and national health care? Why weren’t these policies simply dismissed out of hand? Perhaps deception played a role. But if so, why were so many people fooled so much of the time? If liberty-minded politicians tried to resist the trend to government dependency, why was their resistance so ineffectual? In short, how can a whole country be deceived, bullied, and bamboozled so many times in so many ways for so long—but always by the same methods, and always for the same ends?

None of these questions can be answered if we stick ideological considerations at the end of the process as Twilight does, but they can in principle be answered if ideology is what got the process started in the first place. The truth about our push toward dependency, I think, is closer to Ayn Rand’s view of things than Twilight’s. Recall Rand’s memorable depiction of the demise of the Twentieth Century Company in *Atlas Shrugged*, in which workers were “convinced” (as best one could be) of the moral propriety of running their company by the principle “from each according to his ability, to

each according to his need.” The policy didn’t just come out of the blue; it arose from a specifically *moral* consensus about the priority of need to ability and desert.

Rand meant the *Atlas Shrugged* sequence as an allegory, but I think it works pretty well as history, too. For all of our vaunted “self-reliance,” Americans have often wanted to get something for nothing, and have been willing to pick their neighbors’ pockets to get it. This propensity took off not in the twentieth century but in the middle of the nineteenth, which is when dependency on the government received its real moral imprimatur (see chapter 6 of Leonard Peikoff, *The Ominous Parallels*, [New York: New American Library, 1982], and chapter 3 of David Kelley, *A Life of One’s Own*, [Washington, D.C.: Cato Institute, 1998]). The unpleasant truth is that Americans have traditionally been *willing* to be “deceived” by those who would make them dependent. The blame for dependency, then, can’t somehow be placed at the door of wily politicians who “fooled” those innocent babes, the American people. It has to be placed at the door of the millions of Americans who were willing to deceive themselves in order to muscle in on their neighbors’ liberty and property. To paraphrase a recent book title, when it comes to dependency, it takes a nation.

In this light, for all of its virtues, *Dependent on D.C.* strikes me as both overly cynical and overly naïve about politics. Twight’s cynicism about government blinds her to the possibility that (mistaken) moral idealism might genuinely have played a role in the rise of government dependency. As she sees it, *every* explanation of government action has to draw on the apparatus of Public Choice theory, appealing in every case to increased transaction costs, and focusing obsessively on the government’s imperative to amass power. Consequently, every government official becomes Machiavelli in disguise, and dirty tricks become the central explanatory factor behind virtually everything the government does. The claim is vastly overgeneralized, and not particularly believable. By reverse token, Twight’s naivete about the “self-reliance” of the American people in some bygone age blinds her to the possibility that there never was any such bygone age. One gets the impression that Twight simply cannot *believe* that the American people would have accepted government dependency if they’d known the real facts behind the programs that they voted for. But that raises the question of why they continue to accept it once the facts are in.

My overall assessment of this book is therefore mixed. On the one hand, Twight draws attention to crucial episodes in recent political history that ought to be more widely known and would otherwise have fallen by the wayside. On the other hand, the book contains significant flaws that undercut

its genuinely valuable message. In the end, however, I think the book's ratio of assets to liabilities makes it well worth reading. Whether it will change any minds remains to be seen.

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