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Want less government? Defend marriage

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Americans are rightly alarmed at the torrent of government spending that floods Washington and the state capitals. Neglected in most calls to avert looming disaster and rebalance our nation's books, though, is a vigorous defense of traditional marriage.

How's that again? Simply this: Anyone who stands for free enterprise and free markets shouldn't stand still for "free love" - or any of the other baggage of the sexual revolution.

Proponents of same-sex marriage often use the rhetoric of individual choice and liberty to advance their agenda. In reality, if they succeed in deinstitutionalizing traditional marriage in America, we'd have less freedom under a more powerful, more expensive state.

Doubters should consider the historic fact that liberalizing divorce laws was a priority for radicals as early as the Bolsheviks in Russia and as recently as the Socialist government in Spain.

Marriage is a universal social institution. It arose spontaneously, even before politics. Its essential purpose is to attach mothers and fathers to their children and to one another.

When human beings are born, they're helpless. They require years of adult assistance to survive and mature. Marriage exists, in all times and places, to solve this social problem.

But the benefits of marriage extend beyond family. In developed countries, the family takes care of its dependent young rather than foisting that responsibility on taxpayers and the state.

Marriage resembles the market in harnessing the abilities and knowledge of millions within a decentralized social system. Rather than a centralized state agency raising all children in a homogenized way, each couple raises their kids in the way they deem most likely to succeed.

When marriages thrive, government's role recedes. By providing a minimal legal structure for marriage, the state encourages massive voluntary cooperation. As long as a couple fulfills a few basic requirements, the state has no further concern. Marriage is a largely self-regulating system.

In contrast, the breakup of families - or failure to form them - fosters expansions of state authority and spending. This is because children from disrupted families do worse in virtually every way than children of intact marriages. They are more likely to have physical and mental health problems. Studies show they suffer a higher risk of psychiatric disease, attempted suicide and substance abuse. Regardless of family income, fatherless boys are more likely to be aggressive - and ultimately put behind bars.

These social pathologies are painful to those directly involved. But they also increase the burden on taxpayers and produce a more activist, intrusive state.

The goal of "knocking marriage off its perch" now permeates the teaching of family law. The state, in this view, has no particular interest in channeling parenthood into marriage or in assigning social and legal rights to biological parents.

If the family-law radicals have their way, the state's power will increase dramatically. Courts will not simply record parentage, they'll actually determine parentage.

Same-sex marriage is only the most recent, most dramatic attempt to separate biology from parenthood. And getting the government out of marriage is the leftist solution to Americans' conflict over same-sex marriage - as if "privatizing marriage" were like privatizing the post office.

A state that no longer prefers biological mothers and fathers to other family forms, however, is a state that reduces incentives for parents to work together - and further empowers itself.

Reducing marriage to a collection of individuals loosely stapled together by the state simply can't be good for liberty. Government won't "mind its own business" in a society that has no social norms of family structure, sexual behavior and childrearing. All family business will become the state's business as it tries to support citizens with non-existent family ties.

Traditional marriage is the most vital social institution for reducing the reach and growth of government. That's why Americans alarmed at soaring government debt, spending and taxes should be in the fight to defend marriage.

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