

For a *Less* Responsive Government



All too often these days our peerless politicians reset their policy priorities on the basis of the previous evening's TV news. All politicians are now vulnerable to a charge of being uncaring if they are not perceived to do something about the *crise du jour*, the penultimate manifestation of the erosion of any constitutional consensus on the limits on government powers. As a consequence, our government has become too responsive to trivial or ephemeral concerns, often at the

expense of more important concerns or an erosion of our liberty, and it has made policy priorities more dependent on where TV journalists happen to point their cameras.

This has been a slow news year. The Cold War is over. The U.S. economy is in the sixth year of recovery with the lowest "misery index" in nearly 30 years. So our political system is now vulnerable to crises that are almost entirely the creation of the press. Some recent examples:

- ◆ A flurry of news reports about fires at black churches led to the usual response from the nation's First Mourner and Congress—making church burning a federal crime. Arson is a heinous and cowardly crime, but all this political busywork was provoked without any demonstration that the number of church fires was unusually high, that they were instigated by some organization, that state laws are inadequate, or that the federal government has any constitutional authority for the new legislation.
- ◆ The average retail price of gasoline increased about 20 percent since last November, as the result of a combination of the normal seasonal pattern and some temporary supply problems that especially affected California. This led Clinton to announce two minor actions (with opposite effects on the supply of gasoline) and Congress to consider a temporary reduction in the federal gasoline tax without any apparent analysis by either party.
- ◆ AT&T, a company that had grown fat during its long period of monopoly, announced that it would lay off 40,000 employees last winter. This announcement, amplified by an irresponsible series of articles in the *New York Times*, was the only apparent basis for the "economic insecurity" theme of political reporting during the Republican primaries. In the meantime, total employment increased by several hundred

thousand a month and the unemployment rate declined to a seven-year low, with no increase in the job dismissal rate or the median period of unemployment, all of which was ignored by most political journalists. The baseless repetition of the "economic insecurity" theme, however, increased the audience for the usual nonsense by Secretary Reich and the uglier parts of Pat Buchanan's agenda.

- ◆ Several recent airline crashes and a pipe bomb at the Olympics have provoked demands for new measures to counter "terrorism," although no evidence has yet been produced that any of the incidents were instigated by terrorists. Every week about 2,000 Americans die from accidents or are murdered, but only

the dramatic incidents provoke much of a political response. The search for villains has led Clinton to seek federal authority for measures to counter a much broader definition of terrorism and has already led Congress to impose unduly harsh conditions on legal immigrants. The Cuban MiG that shot down a Florida-based light airplane that had been probing Cuban airspace provoked a similar overreaction in the form of U.S. sanctions on foreign firms with activities in Cuba.

As a nation we have lost our sense of tragedy, a recognition that bad things happen to good people. A nation that expects the government to prevent churches from burning, to control the price of bread or gasoline, to secure every job, and to find some villain for every dramatic accident risks an even larger loss of life and liberty. We should stop whining to the TV cameras and share our grief only within the community of family and friends, without expecting some politician to feel our pain.

Our politicians should slow down, take a deep breath, and think a little about each new demand on the government. When in

doubt, procrastinate. Do *not* legislate, regulate, or litigate in haste. Many demands on the government are trivial or ephemeral. When the demands on your job seem unbearable, do something relaxing for you and safe for the rest of us, maybe go on an extended junket.

—William A. Niskanen