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“Government Is The Things We Do Together”: Perhaps the Stupidest Thing Ever Said

Kevin Carson

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Barney Frank’s statement, “Government is simply a word for the things we decide to do together,” is getting a lot of re-circulation lately in goo-goo circles desperate for a glib answer to those who view government as a threat. Anyone who says a damfool thing like this and seriously means it is a gullible idiot who shouldn’t leave home without adult supervision.

To see how nonsensical this claim is, let’s apply it to some concrete examples from history. If “government is the things we decide to do together,” then “we” must have decided to use US troops to break the Pullman Strike and to institute martial law in most western states and use the National Guard to wage all-out war on striking miners. “We” must have decided together on the mass incarceration of political prisoners during WWI, and the detention of Japanese-Americans during WWII. “We” must have decided to overthrow Diem and fabricate the Tonkin Gulf incident to lie ourselves into war in Vietnam, and used “Kuwaiti incubator babies” and “weapons of mass destruc-

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tion” to lie ourselves into two wars in Iraq. “We” decided to keep ourselves from knowing the provisions of treaties like the Trans-Pacific Partnership, negotiated in secret by the US Trade Rep in collusion with global corporations.

I repeat, without apology: Anyone who uses this phrase is stupid.

Furthermore it’s odd, if government really is just “what we decide to do together,” that it puts such enormous effort and resources into making sure we — the allegedly sovereign public it serves — don’t decide anything it disapproves of. For decades the U.S. government has treated U.S. public opinion as something to be managed with the same propaganda and disinformation techniques it would use to manage the perceptions of an enemy population or government.

The idea that “we” can “decide together” at all presupposes that we’re free to communicate with one another, without any outside attempts at disruption or sabotage by the government we allegedly work through, in order to decide what to tell the government to do. Operation COINTELPRO was used to sabotage “left-wing radical” organizations in the 1960s because the US government viewed the portion of the political spectrum it occupied as illegitimate, and wanted to sanitize that portion of the political spectrum from the marketplace of ideas.

In recent years Congress has explicitly approved Pentagon operations to operate covertly in the media to manage American public perception in the same way it previously operated outside the US. Former Clinton “National Security” Advisor Sandy Berger warned in 2004, regarding declining public support for the Iraq war: “We have too much at stake ... to lose the American people.” That didn’t sound much like a government waiting for the American people to “decide together” whether the war in Iraq was a good thing, did it?

And now the Pentagon is conducting research into the causes of the tipping points in public opinion that led to mass disaffection and the coalescence of opposition in Arab

Spring uprisings like Tunisia and Egypt — so it can prevent such “social contagion” (their words) from happening here, of course. Considering the Occupy movement in the US was directly inspired by the organizational model of the Arab Spring, M15 and Syntagma, this is no mere academic matter. In fact the Pentagon specifically refers to “nonviolent social activists” and “radical causes” promoted by peaceful NGOs.

So if government isn’t just what “we decide to do together,” who does it serve? All the actions described above make a lot more sense if we view government, in Marx’s words, as “the executive committee of the capitalist ruling class.” That should be — and was — a good enough definition for free market libertarians. For example, Franz Oppenheimer called the state the “political means” to wealth, by which an economic ruling class of capitalists extracted rents from the rest of society via artificial scarcities, monopolies and artificial property rights enforced by government.

The state is not “us.” It is THEM.