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PERSPECTIVE**Weighing In**

Last spring the Arkansas legislature passed a law requiring schools to compute each student's body mass (using the Body Mass Index, BMI) and record it on report cards. The BMI generates a number based on a person's height and weight, and is supposed to indicate something about one's health. However, it's been criticized for not distinguishing between fat and muscle. A few years ago the government revised the index, and 30 million people woke up overweight. According to the Center for Consumer Freedom (www.consumerfreedom.com/game_fatchart.cfm), the new BMI has these people as overweight or obese: Sylvester Stallone, Arnold Schwarzenegger, Bruce Willis, Michael Jordan, and me (5 feet, 7 inches, and 158 pounds).

For *Ideas on Liberty* the issue, of course, is not the questionable validity of the BMI; it's the propriety of a law requiring agents of the state, government teachers, to keep track of the body mass of students who are compelled to attend school.

At FEE it's our policy not to tell the government how to run its schools. We just think no one should be forced to attend or pay for them. Nevertheless, the Arkansas law is instructive. Education historians have long known that government did not get into education because the private sector couldn't handle it. The education market was vibrant and accessible to rich and poor in the days before "public education." Government got itself involved because it was the obvious way to conduct grand social engineering. The American architects of the Prussian-inspired "common school" promised to create a new and improved society—to eradicate crime and sin—by replacing the influence of vicious, slothful parents with that of enlightened state-trained educators. Physical fitness was part of the program, along with a curriculum of social studies that portrays expanding government power as benign and the voluntary sphere as ever threatening.



This matter confirms another warning of those (notably Thomas Szasz) who see danger in the union of health and state. “We are facing a crisis in this country and in Arkansas with obesity,” State Senator Sue Madison said. “I realize this is seeming like a huge invasion of privacy but there is a concern because of the health crisis and to some extent that crisis will be [borne] by the taxpayers in the future.”

Everyone who believes that government can pay for medical care without serious consequences for liberty can now take stock. All kinds of restrictions on our freedom and privacy—and all impositions on our children—can be defended as ways to save the taxpayers money. Fiscal responsibility has been enlisted in the cause of statism and collectivism. That was the rationalization for the states’ suits against the tobacco industry. It will be used to justify suits against fast-food restaurants and who knows what else?

The moral: there is no innocuous use of aggressive force.

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Spam may be okay for breakfast, but few people want it flowing into their computers all day. Must we look to government to save us? No, says Christopher Westley.

Ludwig von Mises, in a 1946 reprint, analyzes the effect of the Great German Inflation on business.

For some strange reason, the people who make life-saving drugs are under assault. Doug Bandow asks us to consider what things would be like without the pharmaceutical companies.

When one thinks of Austrian economics

one thinks of Ludwig von Mises, the great theorist and an adviser to FEE founder Leonard E. Read. In the second installment of a classic reprint, legendary economic journalist Henry Hazlitt explores the contributions of Mises and later generations of Austrian writers.

The term “rent-seeking” is often used in discussions of public policy from a free-market perspective. Sanford Ikeda contributes a primer on subject.

The U.S. Supreme Court had handed down landmark decisions on affirmative action at state colleges and universities. George Leef provides a tour of the court’s reasoning.

Even though little is known about what causes climate change, an awful lot of people “know” what to do about it. Christopher Lingle advises caution.

A group of critics of laissez faire called themselves “distributists.” Concerned with the insecurities in the marketplace, they offered a philosophy with some surface appeal. Thomas Woods goes beneath the surface.

Columns this month: Richard Ebeling looks back at the German hyperinflation. Robert Higgs examines the federal government’s venture into the shipping industry. Donald Boudreaux looks at population fallacies. Walter Williams praises the social role of profit. And William Thomas, hearing the argument that Africa’s future depends on handouts from wealthy Americans, replies, “It Just Ain’t So!”

This month’s book reviewers meditate on Adam Smith, the income tax, money, and the war on terrorism.

—SHELDON RICHMAN