

Government without Principles

Atlanta, Jan. 13 — Gov. Zell Miller proposed Tuesday that the state provide the parents of every Georgia newborn with a classical music cassette or compact disc in order to boost the infant's intelligence later in life.

We could make fun of poor Governor Miller. We could congratulate him on offering parents a choice of a cassette or CD and wonder why he won't also offer them a choice of musical styles. Or we could note that at least one expert quoted in the *New York Times* indicates that the research on music and intelligence is far from conclusive. We could question the wisdom of a governor who goes straight from reading an article in *Time* magazine to establishing a state program.

But the real issue here is what we might call government without a compass, government that careens wildly from scheme to scheme because it has no guiding principles. If Governor Miller thinks it is the role of government to provide musical recordings to the parents of newborns, is there any task he considers inappropriate for government? And in that regard is he any different from any other governor, member of Congress, or president?

We used to have rules for government. Unique among nations, the United States was founded on a clear conception of the role of government. The Declaration of Independence, our founding document, declared that "all men . . . are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights . . . life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" and that "to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men."

The Constitution established a government of delegated, enumerated, and thus limited powers. That is, Americans understood that they had their rights prior to and independent of government. In the Constitution, they delegated some of their rights to a federal government. In so doing, they enumerated the specific powers that they were placing with the government, and that enumeration limited the new government's power. The Declaration set out a clear principle for the role of government, and the Constitution set up a government according to that principle.

For many years Americans expected the federal government, at least, to operate largely according to the rules of the Constitution. With a few exceptions, it did not interfere in matters best left to states, localities, or civil society, and most Americans encountered the federal government only in the form of the postman. But after a century or so, the national government began to hand out subsidies and dabble in economic regulation. Just a little bit at first, then a little more and a little more. By the 1930s Charles Warren could write a book called *Government as Santa Claus*.

Each new subsidy and regulation weakened the original conception of limited government. After all, people could reason, if

government can help the farmers of Ohio, why not Illinois? And if the farmers, why not the veterans? And if the veterans, why not the elderly? And eventually there ensued what James Buchanan has called the collapse of the constitutional consensus, when everyone made a mad dash for the piñata of federal largesse.

By the 1970s the federal government was being called on to bail out individual failing companies such as Penn Central and Chrysler. Today, a perusal of any month's "To be governed . . ." reveals that there is no subject so petty, so local, or so absurd that some politician won't propose to have government tax, regulate, mandate, forbid, or subsidize it. And alas, there are all too few Americans left who don't ask the government to subsidize their businesses and their hobbies and ban all of their neighbors' annoying habits.

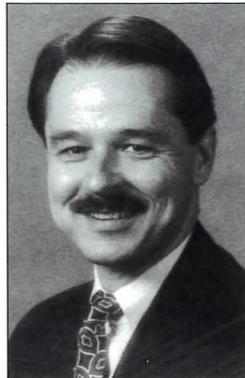
The Consumer Product Safety Commission issues mandatory rules for bunk beds. Twentysomethings in Howard County, Maryland, the offspring of prosperous lawyers and lobbyists, complain that the county government doesn't provide any hobbies or social

activities for them. Rep. Bill Paxton (R-N.Y.) proposes that the federal government subsidize the hiring of 100,000 new teachers, a local function if there ever was one. The futile War on Drugs leads to 13-year-olds being suspended from school because they have Advil in their purses. Half the stories in every newspaper should be headlined "Stop me before I legislate again." In such a climate government has become Big Brother, Santa Claus, and Mary Poppins all rolled into

one. And the vice presidency of the United States, a position once held by John Adams and Thomas Jefferson, is now held by a man who declares that the federal government should be like a grandparent to the American people.

In the modern world Zell Miller is the ideal governor, a man who thinks his every idea, his every newspaper clipping, his every impulse should be enforced by law, with the bill sent to the productive people of Georgia.

Government not guided by firm principles is government adrift, government run amok, like a gargantuan two-year-old with an Uzi. It's time to tell the politicians, When all else fails, read the original instructions.



“Government has become Big Brother, Santa Claus, and Mary Poppins all rolled into one.”

—David Boaz