

No, President Biden, We Are Not the Government

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People who desire the protection of freedom from overreaching government have much to be concerned about in President Joe Biden's Thursday [speech](#) focused on coronavirus and coronavirus-related government actions. Yet, likely the most dangerous to freedom proposition in Biden's speech is an assertion he made that goes far beyond coronavirus-related matters – that the United States government is the same as “us,” the American people.

Biden declared in the speech:

Look, we know what we need to do to beat this virus: Tell the truth. Follow the scientists and the science. Work together. Put trust and faith in our government to fulfill its most important function, which is protecting the American people – no function more important.

We need to remember the government isn't some foreign force in a distant capital. No, it's us. All of us. “We the People.” For you and I, that America thrives when we give our hearts, when we turn our hands to common purpose. And right now, my friends, we are doing just that. And I have to say, as your President, I am grateful to you.

Biden is far from the first politician to assert that the American people are the government. Over forty years ago – in

1974, Murray Rothbard examined this absurd, dangerous, and often repeated claim in his essay "The Anatomy of the State." Rothbard's essay begins with a section titled "What the State Is Not" that reads like a direct response to the claim in Biden's speech. Rothbard wrote:

The State is almost universally considered an institution of social service. Some theorists venerate the State as the apotheosis of society; others regard it as an amiable, though often inefficient, organization for achieving social ends; but almost all regard it as a necessary means for achieving the goals of mankind, a means to be ranged against the "private sector" and often winning in this competition of resources. With the rise of democracy, the identification of the State with society has been redoubled, until it is common to hear sentiments expressed which violate virtually every tenet of reason and common sense such as, "we are the government." The useful collective term "we" has enabled an ideological camouflage to be thrown over the reality of political life. If "we are the government," then anything a government does to an individual is not only just and untyrannical but also "voluntary" on the part of the individual concerned. If the government has incurred a huge public debt which must be paid by taxing one group for the benefit of another, this reality of burden is obscured by saying that "we owe it to ourselves"; if the government conscripts a man, or throws him into jail for dissident opinion, then he is "doing it to himself" and, therefore, nothing untoward has occurred. Under this reasoning, any Jews murdered by the Nazi government were not murdered; instead, they must have "committed suicide," since they were the government (which was democratically chosen), and, therefore, anything the government did to them was voluntary on their part. One would not think it necessary to belabor this point, and yet the overwhelming bulk of the people hold this fallacy to a greater or lesser degree.

We must, therefore, emphasize that “we” are not the government; the government is not “us.” The government does not in any accurate sense “represent” the majority of the people. But, even if it did, even if 70 percent of the people decided to murder the remaining 30 percent, this would still be murder and would not be voluntary suicide on the part of the slaughtered minority. No organicist metaphor, no irrelevant bromide that “we are all part of one another,” must be permitted to obscure this basic fact.

If, then, the State is not “us,” if it is not “the human family” getting together to decide mutual problems, if it is not a lodge meeting or country club, what is it? Briefly, the State is that organization in society which attempts to maintain a monopoly of the use of force and violence in a given territorial area; in particular, it is the only organization in society that obtains its revenue not by voluntary contribution or payment for services rendered but by coercion. While other individuals or institutions obtain their income by production of goods and services and by the peaceful and voluntary sale of these goods and services to others, the State obtains its revenue by the use of compulsion; that is, by the use and the threat of the jailhouse and the bayonet. Having used force and violence to obtain its revenue, the State generally goes on to regulate and dictate the other actions of its individual subjects. One would think that simple observation of all States through history and over the globe would be proof enough of this assertion; but the miasma of myth has lain so long over State activity that elaboration is necessary.

You can read Rothbard’s complete essay [here](#).