Voltairine de Cleyre 1866-1912

Our Present Attitude

Lysander Spooner 1808-1887

Forced Consent
Forced Consent (1873)
by Lysander Spooner (1808-1887)

Abraham Lincoln did not cause the death of so many people from a mere love of slaughter, but only to bring about a state of consent that could not otherwise be secured for the government he had undertaken to administer. When a government has once reduced its people to a state of consent - that is, of submission to its will - it can put them to a much better use than to kill them; for it can then plunder them, enslave them, and use them as tools for plundering and enslaving others. And these are the uses to which most governments, our own among the rest, do put their people, whenever they have once reduced them to a state of consent to its will. Andrew Jackson said that those who did not consent to the government he attempted to administer upon them, for that reason, were traitors, and ought to be hanged. Like so many other so-called "heroes," he thought the sword and the gallows excellent instrumentalities for securing the people's consent to be governed. The idea that, although government should rest on the consent of the governed, yet so much force may nevertheless be employed as may be necessary to produce that consent, embodies everything that was ever exhibited in the shape of usurpation and tyranny in any country on earth. It has cost this country a million of lives, and the loss of everything that resembles political liberty. It can have no place except as a part of a system of absolute military despotism. And it means nothing else either in this country, or in any other. There is no half-way house between a government depending wholly on voluntary support, and one depending wholly on military compulsion. And mankind have only to choose between these two classes - the class that governs, and the class that is governed or enslaved. In this case, the government rests wholly on the consent of the governors, and not at all on the consent of the governed. And whether the governors are more or less numerous than the governed, and whether they call themselves monarchists, aristocrats, or republicans, the principle is the same. The simple, and only material fact, in all cases, is, that one body of men are robbing and enslaving another. And it is only upon military compulsion that men will submit to be robbed and enslaved, it necessarily follows that any government, to which the governed, the weaker party, do not consent, must be (in regard to that weaker party), a merely military despotism. Such is the state of things now in this country, and in every other in which government does not depend wholly upon voluntary support. There never was and there never will be, a more gross, self-evident, and inexusable violation of the principle that government should rest on the consent of the governed, than was the late war, as carried on by the North. There never was, and there never will be, a more palpable case of purely military despotism than is the government we now have.

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