

Leviathan? Try Pufferfish

BY MARNI SOUPCOFF

I WAS SURFING THE INTERNET THE OTHER DAY, when I came across a page dedicated to political philosophy. There it all was — Hobbes’s social contract, Locke’s state of nature, Rousseau’s general will — all the names and concepts I’d dutifully spat out on undergrad exams.

As I sat at my computer, briefly reliving the glory of my first year poli sci class in my head, I couldn’t help but wonder: Why do they make politics so complicated for students? If you asked me today, wiseden by experience as I am, I’d say that the whole thing really boils down to a single concept: Government is a pufferfish.

I know that’s an unorthodox view. Political philosophy tends to revolve around discussions of democracy and rights and economics. It rarely touches on aquatic animals. But I’m convinced that the pufferfish analogy is one of the most accurate assessments of the state you’re likely to find. As proof, I submit this explanation from online encyclopedia *Wikipedia*: Pufferfish “are named for their ability to inflate themselves to several times their normal size by swallowing water or air when threatened.”

Doesn’t that sound familiar? Just replace the “swallowing water or air” bit with “passing laws” and you’ve got a perfect match.

Government is a giant sea creature, trying to swell itself up with new legislation to keep itself alive.

If you still don’t believe me, consider the kinds of laws that the federal government has been passing this year.

In March, there was the “Combat Meth Epidemic Act.” This law makes it illegal for sniffly people with adenoid problems to purchase more than a certain amount of cold medicine a day. It decrees that in order to get their hands on a precious Tylenol Cold caplet, miserably congested folks must first show I.D. and enter their information in a logbook.

The ostensible motivation for the law is to stop people from manufacturing the illegal drug methamphetamine with ingredients found in cold medicines. But even if you view that as a wise end (and many of us don’t), the legislation makes no sense.

Forty states already had similar (but tougher) laws on the books. Many of the remaining states, such as those in New England, simply had no problems with meth production. Others were working on passing meth laws in their state legislatures.

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And some drugstore chains were already voluntarily restricting access to the cold remedies in question.

In other words, the problem was covered, and the only reason the federal government had for passing the Combat Meth Epidemic Act was to puff itself up but good, like a Japanese diner’s dream.

Then, there was last July’s Senate “Child Protection & Safety Bill,” which made it illegal to transport a minor across state lines for the purpose of getting an abortion without her parents’ knowledge. Once again, you may think that the purported goal is a valid end. But even if you’re keen on parental notification requirements, the legislation wasn’t necessary. There is no evidence of a rash of third parties screaming down the country’s interstates with pregnant minors in tow. And

there is no reason to think that the vast majority of minors seeking an abortion

can’t get themselves to another state on their own (the government hasn’t seen fit to deny minors driver’s licenses — yet).

No, this was the pufferfish at work again, expanding itself far beyond necessity in order to ensure its survival and scare away anyone who might pose a threat.

Of course, government bureaucracies behave the same way. Take the Department of Homeland Security.

It started out as a reasonable-sized fish — maybe a bit larger than your average tadpole, but hey, it was designed to protect the country from terrorists. It couldn’t exactly be a minnow. But in the three years since it was created, the agency has seen its spending swell from \$3.5 billion in fiscal 2003 to \$10 billion in fiscal 2005. A congressional report recently derided Homeland Security for its massive waste and mismanagement of contracts. The agency has, in other words, taken virtually no time at all to bloat itself into a huge balloon of a pufferfish.

OK, so maybe government is a pufferfish, you may be thinking. But what are we supposed to do about it? Well, I’m no political philosopher, but it would seem to me that the wisest course would be to treat government as we do pufferfish: Devour it for dinner with a nice cup of sake.

But do be careful. *Wikipedia* warns that “the eyes and internal organs of most pufferfish are highly toxic.” I believe anyone who’s gotten a good look at the inner workings of Congress would agree.

