



Written by [Becky Akers](#) on February 17, 2010

Lessons on Leviathan: Tarps and Tents

People weren't the only casualties of Haiti's horrific earthquake last month. Also devastated was the constellation of virtues and blessings we call "the market." The resulting poverty, which exceeds even Haiti's usual desperation, testifies not only to the market's goodness but to the agony awaiting all who prefer the State.

One aspect of that agony: Haiti's homeless currently languish under tarps — and "flimsy" ones at that, [according to a story from the Associated Press](#). Folks "swelter" on sunny days only to flail in the mud on rainy ones. There's [no privacy and no security](#), either personal or for property. And so Haitians pine for tents: "Ask any of the hundreds of thousands of earthquake victims living outdoors in Haiti's shattered capital and you're apt to get the same plea: 'Give us a tent.'" That encapsulates most of what's wrong with Haiti — and modern America.



Dreams don't come much simpler or inexpensive than a tent. Wal-Mart sells a ["hiker/biker" model that sleeps one person for \\$28](#); users laud it as ["very roomy and very dry](#) even with the rain we had" and "probably the best \$20 tent you're going to find." Forty-five bucks snags you a ["Kodiak Tent"](#) for 4-6 people. And a veritable palace of [three rooms with amenities](#) such as a "front rain fly [that] creates added weather protection," "Weather Armor rain protection," and a "gear loft for added storage" costs you only \$119.

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And there's the trick: you pay. Depending on someone else to support you, "plead[ing] 'Give us a tent,'" means trusting to others' compassion and mercy — always a risky proposition in our fallen world. It also requires their opinion of your needs to coincide with yours. Rich Uncle Winthrop may believe a copy of *Miss Manners' Guide to Excruciatingly Correct Behavior* will benefit you far more than the HDTV you're demanding for your birthday. Likewise, Haitians will get their tents when others are so inclined — if they ever are.

Which doesn't seem likely at this point: Haiti's government has declared itself in favor of tarps. Its excuse? ["With an estimated](#) 1.2 million people displaced by the earthquake — some 770,000 of them still in the capital — officials say there is no room for family-sized tents with their wide bases." And why do officials get to decide whether there's room? [Because the government claims most of Haiti's land](#). Granny might be willing, even eager, to crowd her half-acre lot if it means her two daughters and their kids can bed down there in "family-sized tents with...wide bases" — but the privilege and responsibility of deciding belong to her landlord.



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Besides, “[the cluster of foreign](#) and Haitian officials in charge of shelter decisions does not trust the mishmash of aid organizations involved to buy the right ones[,] ...saying that after the 2005 Pakistan earthquake, 80 percent of tents distributed were not waterproof.” You might think the “aid organizations” would resent “officials” dismissing them as idiots. But no. They fell in line, agreeing that “tents are too big, too costly and too inefficient.”

Though not for their own quarters. “Ironically,” AP says when it means “predictably,” “many of those charged with deciding are themselves sleeping in tents.” That includes “U.N. civilian staff...foreign soldiers...U.S. diplomats...” Tyrants always live better than the folks they exploit.

If we lived in a world of unlimited resources, everyone could have everything he wants — mansions instead of tarps, crab-legs rather than breadfruit. But we don’t. So how do we divvy up scarce resources? Who decides how much of what goes to whom?

One method involves each man’s applying his skill, energy and time to nature’s bounty. That transforms earth, water, and air into things so useful that others willingly exchange what they have produced for them. A farmer turns a field and some seed into a sack of wheat; manufacturers eat bread milled from that wheat while they transmute sand into silicon chips so farmers can track the weather on computers. Barring catastrophes — a drought, a fire in the warehouse — only their ingenuity and industry limit the wealth farmers and manufacturers beget, both for themselves and others. Critics often charge this free-market system with being impersonal, and it is. No one’s in charge, so his whims or prejudice can’t impoverish his neighbor while he enriches himself and his cronies.

There are other ways of dividing resources, of course — all of them exceedingly personal. The farmer and manufacturer could also give away their products. When they do so voluntarily, we call it charity. When they do so under compulsion, it’s theft. Men acting individually to wrest wealth from its creators are thieves and robbers. More usually, they band together to prey on producers. And then behold the magic: they are no longer thieves but “government.” Nor does it matter what they do with the loot they steal. They can keep it for themselves, in which case their victims condemn them as corrupt, or they can buy votes with it through entitlements. Citizens may lose just as much or even more of their money, but now they praise their rulers as benevolent, open, fair, and democratic.

The result is the same. Whether corrupt or democratic, government merely shuffles goods that have already been produced. It creates nothing new; we are none the richer for the shuffling, which in fact always and inevitably leads to poverty. How extreme that poverty is and how quickly it descends depends on the ratio of thieves to producers as well as how much the former steal — in other words, how large the government is.

Certainly Haitians have suffered long and heartbreakingly under corrupt, oppressive rulers. But, like the American taxpayers whose foreign aid subsidizes those dictators, Haitians schizophrenically look to government for “help.” Meanwhile, the staggering amount of money pouring into the devastated island has [done little to alleviate the misery](#) (the \$537 million from the U.S. alone comes to \$59.43 for [every Haitian](#) — enough for a Kodiak tent and some food; a fortune in a country where [most people live on less than \\$2 per day](#)). Nor will it until Haitians shake off government and the dependence it teaches.

The same abyss yawns for Americans. The earthquakes of socialism and progressivism have ruptured the shackles our Founding Fathers fashioned for government. Let’s learn from Haiti’s misery before it’s too late.

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