



Fire the Fire Department

The State that imprisons heroin junkies is as addicted to money as its victims are to their dope. And like them, it will do anything to keep supplies of its drug flowing — no matter how self-destructive.

[“To help close a budget deficit,”](#) New York City’s Fire Department proposes to charge drivers when it responds to accidents they’ve suffered. This [“crash tax”](#) would range from \$365 to \$490 and [“generate”](#) (*sic* for “transfer from our pocket to the State’s yawning maw”) another cool million per year — without a corresponding reduction in taxes: showing such basic decency to the taxpayer would defeat the whole purpose. Thus far, the FDNY hasn’t suggested billing owners whose buildings catch fire, but that’s undoubtedly next.

Provided they replace taxes — which is never the case when government suggests users’ fees; they are always in addition to its existing theft and are, in fact, the sort of financial follies for which private entrepreneurs could go to jail — everyone who loves liberty should champion the idea of paying government directly for “services” used. Is there any more effective way to convince folks that said scams aren’t worth the cost?

For example, [if families in New York State had forked over \\$17,173](#) per child in 2007-2008 for the compulsory babysitting the government dignifies as “education,” we would see revolution against that charade within a week. Parents with two or three offspring would realize they could hire a tutor for less than the government charges; others would question why their sons need to learn about Heather and her two mommies when the boys will join their fathers in the family’s contracting business. Wouldn’t that \$17,000 be better spent teaching them math and carpentry?

But there’s another, even more valuable blow users’ fees deal the State: they undermine its communism.

The American tax-code has utterly divorced the beneficiaries of “services” and programs from those who pay the bills. All homeowners fund public schools, regardless of whether they have children; everyone with a telephone pays for the operators at 911, whether he ever calls with an emergency or not. And of course the outright socialism of food stamps, welfare, unemployment, etc., carries this





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wickedness to its logical conclusion, robbing all citizens, most of whom will never file claims with any of these bureaucracies, to benefit the few who do.

Users' fees quash this racket without even trying to — or would, if the State didn't impose them on top of taxes. People who paid each time they call the cops or firemen, who ponied up to dispose of their trash, who footed the bills for their kids' schooling, would soon ask why they're still paying general taxes on top of these specific ones. Ergo, the tactic of "closing a budget deficit" by charging patrons for a "service" is a dangerous one liable to backfire on our rulers.

Perhaps politicians recognize this, because they are stampeding to condemn the FDNY. "[I just can't believe that in a \\$64 billion budget](#), here we are talking about payment for an accident tax," raged NYC Councilman Vincent Ignizio (R- Staten Island), "that you had the misfortune to get into an accident and now we have firemen coming out ... and willing to swipe [your credit card]..."

Vince's ire would be a tad less hypocritical were he not busily boosting that \$64-billion budget: "[He has worked tirelessly](#) to establish a South Shore Ferry and expand express bus service while fighting to build the Rossville 'Hub' Library. He has also spearheaded the effort to add nearly 800 park and ride spots on the South Shore, and build a K-12 complex in the Charleston section of Staten Island.... Ignizio is responsible for bringing 'Movies in the Park' to Staten Island" — thereby not only stealing and squandering our money but also robbing theater owners of business — "and granting the largest autism grant to the borough.

Then there was Councilman Peter Vallone Jr. (D-Queens), demonstrating his complete ignorance of economics: "I don't think that people should have to factor in the cost of lifesaving when they make a call." Why not, for Pete's sake? We live in a world of scarce resources; we need some way to allocate them. "Factoring in the cost" is one method of so doing. Or we can let Pete and his cronies divvy up those resources for us — after keeping most for themselves. I vote for the former. "Nine-one-one has always been free (*sic* for 'paid for by others')," Pete added, "and it needs to stay that way." He's even introduced legislation aborting the FDNY's users' fees.

Read more [here](#).

Not all politicians are astute enough to side with Vince and Pete in neutralizing the risk. New York's nanny of a mayor, Michael Bloomberg, defended the FDNY because it "has to do more with less ... Most of the Fire Department's expense, as in all agencies, is salary and pensions. ... Would you like them to close firehouses or would you like them to have less technology? I don't think so. So we've go[t] *sic* to raise the money."

Michael Bloomberg defended the FDNY because it "[has to do has to do more with less](#)."

But there's a far more reasonable and effective option politicians never mention: relinquish firefighting to the free market. After all, that market counteracts such emergencies as computer viruses, while the alarms and weapons it sells protect us from others like burglary and assault (at least, until we head to the airport). Besides, common sense says that one needn't be a municipal employee with a hefty union contract and luxurious pension to quell fires.

Unfortunately, most Americans assume that government can and should fight fires, perhaps because it has interfered in this business since colonial days. As if residents were idiots determined to set themselves alight, early American cities often outlawed such improbabilities as wooden chimneys while empowering "marshals" to trespass on private property for inspections.



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Why not break the State's silly monopoly on rescuing folks from emergencies? Private companies would compete for clients, offering superior service for lower rates. Customers would contract for exactly what they wanted and needed: firefighting only, firefighting and protection from burglary, rescue from flooding, etc. Those who neglected or forgot to secure protection ahead of their emergency would undoubtedly be able to choose from a number of "Johnny-on-the-spot" suppliers. These would probably charge more, but only the immature resent paying for convenience.

Some people might not voluntarily buy any protection of any kind. Should government coerce them? If you answer, "Absolutely! When their homes catch fire, they endanger their neighbors," you have no logical defense against Obamacare: that's precisely the argument its proponents advance, that the uninsured's medical expenses affect everyone else.

Besides, the private market provides much better ways of resolving such problems. Let's say Mr. Uninsured's house on a large lot burns down without harming his neighbors — but leaves him homeless. He must now depend on charity (which, in the free society we're envisioning, would be strictly voluntary and perhaps begrudged to a man of Mr. Uninsured's foolishness). Liberty means accepting responsibility for the results of one's decisions.

But what if Mr. Uninsured lives in an apartment? What if his fire destroys not only his home but 15 others in his building? What if people die?

Insurance or the lack thereof does not kill. A fire severe enough to destroy 16 apartments is severe enough to kill — and will perhaps claim even more casualties from the personnel battling it: most of Mr. Uninsured's neighbors will have bought services from an emergency company, and those companies will respond.

No system is perfect. "Free riders" like Mr. Uninsured might occasionally cost others money or even hurt them through their carelessness. But would you rather confront the chance of paying once in a while, if ever, for Mr. Uninsured or the certainty of supporting fire departments all your life you're unlikely to use?

Meanwhile, "[Mario Juarez, 21, a salesman](#) and driver from Queens, said" of the FDNY's scheme, "They're trying to benefit off of people's misfortune."

Bingo, Mario. That's the nature of the State.



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