

Locking away the Future

“Lockbox Government” by Alasdair Roberts, in *Government Executive* (May 2000), 1501 M St., N.W., Washington, D.C. 20005.

Are officials in the United States and abroad putting future governments in an antidemocratic straitjacket? That’s the question raised by “a broad new trend” that Roberts, a professor of public policy at Queen’s University, in Ontario, calls “lockbox government.”

The most recent example of the trend came last year, he says, when the Clinton administration proposed setting aside \$3 trillion in general revenues over the next 15 years to protect the Social Security and Medicare trust funds. Changes in the budgeting laws would keep future Congresses from touching those dollars—which would thus rest secure, President Bill Clinton said, in “a true lockbox.”

It wasn’t Clinton’s first, Roberts says. The Violent Crime Reduction Trust Fund, created in 1994, “mandated a transfer of general revenues into the fund for six years, imposed conditions on how money in the fund could be spent, and excluded that spending from budget enforcement rules.” Other “lockboxes” have been built since to protect spending in areas such as defense and transportation (home to that 1956 lockbox, the Highway Trust Fund), and many more have been proposed, in fields ranging from medical education to telecommunications. [Vice President Al Gore recently called for

putting “Medicare in a lockbox.”] Between 1987 and 1996, the number of federal accounts with permanent appropriations authority almost doubled. “The trend isn’t limited to the United States,” says Roberts, citing similar examples from Britain and Canada.

Besides protecting spending in broad areas from future cutbacks, governments also have constructed “narrower, agency-specific lockboxes,” he points out. A 1992 law guaranteed future funding for the U.S. Food and Drug Administration, for instance, by letting it collect user fees from the drug companies it regulates. Still another governmental device for safeguarding future spending, Roberts says, is to arrange for private businesses to finance, build, and operate waste-processing facilities or other capital-intensive projects. Though usually promoted as a way to tap private-sector expertise, such “lockboxes” require long-term spending commitments.

There is “something anti-democratic” about the “lockbox” approach, Roberts believes. Democratic governments should adopt it only in cases where there is “clear evidence” that elected representatives cannot look beyond their immediate budgetary woes to meet the public’s long-term investment needs.

FOREIGN POLICY & DEFENSE

The Hazards of Selfless War

“Virtual War” by Michael Ignatieff, in *Prospect* (Apr. 2000), 4 Bedford Sq., London WC1B 3RA, England.

For the comfortable citizens of the NATO countries, far removed from the bombing and killing, and with no vital national interests at stake, the “humanitarian” war in Kosovo last year was only a spectacle, in which they had nothing to lose. Though he believes that particular war was justified, Ignatieff, a journalist and historian, worries that democracies may too readily engage in such “virtual wars” in the future.

“Democracies may remain peace-loving only so long as the risks of war remain real to their citizens,” he writes. “If war becomes virtual—without risk—democratic electorates may be more willing to fight, especially if the cause is jus-

tified in the language of human rights and democracy itself.”

By “virtual,” he means not simply that war is waged largely with bombing and high-tech weaponry, and seems “to take place on a screen,” but that “it enlists societies only in virtual ways. Nothing ultimate is at stake: neither national survival nor the fate of the economy.” As a result, war becomes “a spectator sport,” with the media “a decisive theater of operations,” and both sides trying “to inflict perceptual damage.”

Two centuries ago, with the French revolutionary army of the 1790s, war became associ-