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The Omnipotence Scandal

There is a new scam for obstructing progress on complex problems that can be called "The Omnipotence Scandal." The first step is to take a complex problem and imply that an obvious solution is at hand. It is also implied that some public official, if not omnipotent, is close to it, and therefore it is a scandal that the proper course of action has not been implemented. When, however, a solution is proposed, it is denounced because it fails to meet some previously unrevealed and necessary criterion.

A good example is the problem of the homeless. On one side there are taxpayer groups who on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday say that it is outrageous that the streets are cluttered with the unsightly and the unsanitary. On Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday the same groups denounce budget excesses and oppose "throwing money at the problem." On the other side are the civil liberties groups, who on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday say that it is outrageous that a wealthy, affluent country cannot show the compassion to take care of its helpless. On Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday these same groups declare that any attempt to provide food and shelter to these people against their will is an invasion of their liberty.

The problem of the homeless is extremely complex. They are not a homogeneous group. Some are nice people down on their luck; some are not so nice and survive by petty crimes, if not worse; some are mentally deranged; and some are harmless but impractical rebels against the work ethic. Some want food and shelter; others prefer the life of freedom, with poverty and petty crime as possible concomitants.

All would agree that restricting people's liberty because they look unattractive and are marching to a different drummer is inappropriate, but individuals do not have a right to turn city gutters into public bathrooms or to make sidewalks and museums into private bedrooms. Research on this group, reported in *Science* and elsewhere, indicates that an appropriate solution for one segment will not apply to another. Moreover, the placing of individuals in appropriate categories will be difficult. There is no neat and simple solution, and the officials who have to cope with the problems of the homeless are far from omnipotent. Solutions will require compassion, firmness, compromises on competing "rights," and money. The second-guessers who demand immediate solutions and then block all reasonable efforts are either impractical or hypocritical.

There are many other problems in our society that are equally complex—the treatment and prevention of AIDS, the release on bail of suspects with previous prison records, the policy on loans to developing countries, and the rights of adoptive and natural parents. None is going to be solved by a simplistic formula; all will require public funds. We need not weep for public officials (they are paid to take criticism). Society cannot afford, however, to have decent or imaginative compromises vetoed by those who demand an ethical or financial purity that is unattainable.

The problem of the homeless could be easily solved if they would have the good manners to starve or freeze in some obscure place where they could be forgotten. This is not going to occur. They keep appearing on the streets, in hallways, on hot air vents, reminding our consciences that action is required. A wealthy society should not sleep well at night if it cannot make some sacrifice to help those who cannot help themselves. Plans are being developed and implemented in cities like New York. Those who believe they are too lavish and those who believe they are too cheap, those who do not believe there should be any coercion, and those who believe there should be a great deal more should be heard, but only if they present some more comprehensive and intelligent plan than that proposed by the public official. Simply finding one part of a plan unacceptable is insufficient.

In complex problems of this sort, what is a scandal is that individuals demand on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday that the problem be solved, and on Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday block any reasonable alternative. Those who want to solve a complex problem should not be deterred by those who prefer indignation to implementation. Only if we recognize that the solution to complex problems will inevitably be less than perfect can we ignore the Utopian who would await perfection and move on to helping the hapless.

—DANIEL E. KOSHLAND, JR.