



## M I S E S   D A I L Y

### The Dirty Business of Government Trash Collection



OCTOBER 14, 2015 • Allen Mendenhall

TAGS Big Government, Monopoly and Competition, Prices

I moved to Auburn, Alabama, in January 2013. I love Auburn.

It's been nearly ten years since *The Wall Street Journal* profiled the Mises Institute and claimed that Auburn was an ideal spot for studying libertarian ideas and the Austrian tradition. I don't know how much has changed since then, but I arrived in Auburn expecting a free-market sanctuary, a veritable haven where the ideas of Menger and Mises and Hayek were in the air and imbibed by the majority of people who weren't members of the Auburn faculty, and even by some who were.



Once settled in Auburn, I realized I'd been quixotic and naïve. Even before national media picked up the story about the [officer who spoke out](#) against his department's ticket and arrest quotas, even before the city of Auburn [squeezed out Uber](#) with severe licensing regulations, even before Mark Thornton highlighted [the Skyscraper Curse in town](#), there was the matter of my trash bin.

I bought my house from a relocation company, the previous owner having been assigned a new position in another city. He was, this owner, in a hurry to move. Before he left town, he and his family rolled their trash bin to the side of the home, away from the street, where the garbage collector refused to retrieve it. They had stuffed the bin with garbage: food, paper, cardboard boxes, dirty diapers, and other junk. There was so much trash in the bin that the lid wouldn't fully close. It looked like a yawning mouth. The house was on the market for approximately eight months before I purchased it, and I assume the bin had been sitting there, at the side of the house, the entire time. Naturally it had rained during the last eight months, so, with its half-open lid, the bin was flooded with soupy garbage and untold parasites. And it reeked.

The City enjoys a virtual monopoly on garbage collection; it tacks its fees onto the City's water and sewage bill. The few private garbage-collection companies in town service mostly restaurants and businesses: entities that simply cannot wait a week for garbage pickup and need a service provider capable of emptying whole dumpsters full of trash. The City does allow residents to opt out of their collection services, but this only masks soft coercion with an illusion of consumer choice.

Government opt-out clauses are malicious precisely because of the impression that they're harmless if not generous. Contract law is premised on the principles of mutual assent and voluntary agreement. Government opt-out clauses, however, deprive consumers of volition and bargaining power. They distort the natural contracting relationship by investing one party, the government, with power that the other party cannot enjoy. Not contracting for services is not an option, and government is the default service provider that sets the bargaining rules; the deck is stacked against the consumer before negotiating can begin.

The onus, moreover, is on the consumer to undo a contract that he's been forced into, rather than on the government to provide high-quality services at competitive rates in order to keep the consumer's business. Opt-out clauses make it difficult for the consumer to end his relationship with the government provider, and they force potential competitors to operate at a position of manifest disadvantage.

My wife and I took turns calling the City to ask about getting a new trash bin. No amount of cleaning and sterilization could rid the current bin of its stench. We couldn't keep the bin inside our garage because of the oppressive odor. We left voicemails with different people in different departments at the City, begging for a new bin and explaining our situation, but our calls weren't returned. There was no customer service of the kind a private company would have. After all, there was little danger of losing our business: the City was *the* service provider for nearly every neighborhood in town because of the difficulty private companies had breaking into a market controlled by government. We were, for now, stuck with the City's inefficiencies and unresponsiveness. With much persistence my wife was eventually able to speak to an employee of the City. She

was informed, however, that we could not get a new trash bin unless ours was broken or stolen. That stunk.

I learned in time about other drawbacks to our government-provided garbage service. During the holidays, collection schedules changed. When my wife and I lived in Atlanta and used a privately owned garbage company, our collection schedules never changed. Our collections were always on time. Our garbage collectors were kind and reliable because, if they weren't, I could hire new collectors who would materialize in my driveway the next morning with shining smiles on their faces.

It's simple enough to follow an altered holiday schedule, so that's what we did in Auburn, only the collectors declined to follow that schedule themselves. After Thanksgiving, when trash tends to pile up, we placed our trash bin out on the street according to schedule. So did our neighbors. Yet nobody picked up our trash. Our entire street tried again the next week, on the appointed day, and once again nobody picked up the trash. A concerned neighbor called the City, and we were able to remedy the now-messy situation, but not without spending time and energy that could have been channeled toward better things.

When I was a child my brother and I were tasked each year with clearing trees, weeds, and shrubs that were growing along the pond in our backyard. We would pile sticks and sawed-up tree trunks and other debris on the curb of our driveway, along with bags of grass clippings, and our garbage collectors, who worked for a private company, would always pick up these items without question or complaint. We were so grateful that sometimes we'd leave them envelopes with extra cash to express our thanks.




In Auburn, however, I was once unable to squeeze an additional garbage bag into our trash bin, which was full, so I rolled the bin to the street and placed the additional bag beside it. I then lumbered inside for my morning coffee, when all of a sudden the garbage collector drove up and parked beside my bin. I watched from the window as he descended from his truck, shook his head, climbed back into his truck, picked up a pad and paper, and began scribbling with his pen. The next thing I knew he was issuing a yellow citation for an alleged infraction. It turned out to be a mere warning, but it indicated, right there in bold letters, that the next time we did something so egregious as putting our trash out for collection without using the bin, some repercussion — I forget what — would visit us.


When I think about the things the garbage collectors would remove from our driveway in Atlanta — an old door, a broken toilet, a malfunctioning lawnmower — I marvel that the City requires you to purchase tags at the Revenue Office if you wish to place things like dryers, water heaters, refrigerators, or microwaves on the street for garbage collection. Yet I remain optimistic, and not only because Joseph Salerno is coming to town to hold the newly endowed John V. Denson II chair in the Department of Economics at Auburn University.

I'm optimistic because I see some positive change. We recently organized a garage sale and came to discover, two days before the big day, that the City required a permit for such events. This time when we called the City to ask about the mandatory permit for garage sales, we received good news: those permits were no longer required as long as we conducted the sale in our own driveway. However minor, that's progress. Perhaps it'll spill over into other sectors of our little local community. Until then, War Eagle!

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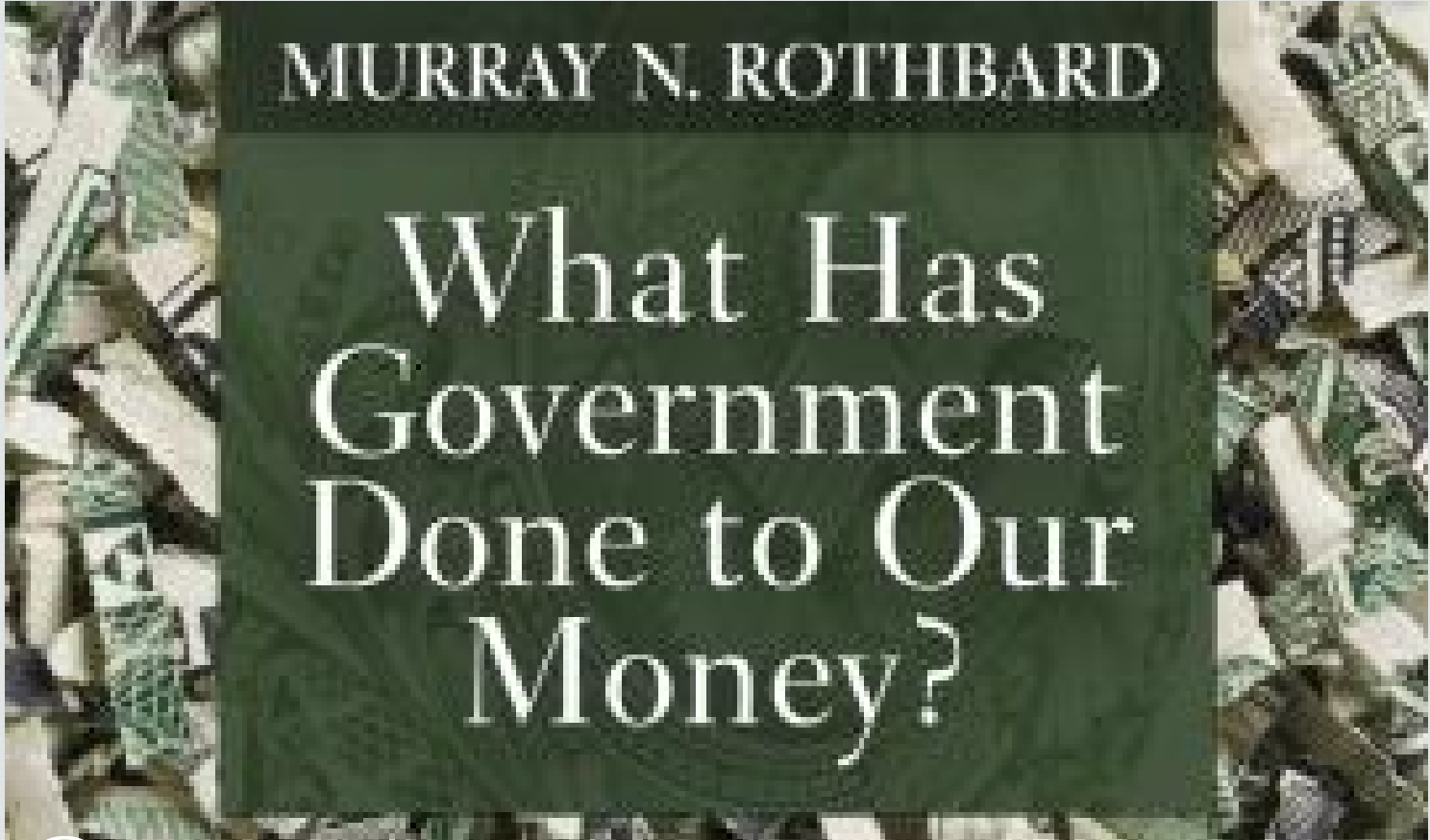
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