**On Hobbes and Halloween**

By [ISAAC ABRAM](http://thenewpolitical.com/author/iabram/) on 10/17/2012 12:32 am / [no comments](http://thenewpolitical.com/2012/10/17/on-hobbes-and-halloween/#commentspost)

Thomas Hobbes was a game-changing political philosopher who argued that without government people would live in perpetual fear. Without an official lawmaker and enforcer, people must fend for themselves in a dystopian world of scarcity where no one is safe from the devils that walk among us. Even if people seem peaceful, this could be a ruse that masks the evil in their souls. To insure our survival we must assume that horror lurks around every corner and in the heart of every creature we meet. After all, Hobbes asks, if people are naturally saints, why do we latch our doors after nightfall?

To rid their lives of anxiety, people formed a compact wherein they agreed to be ruled by a looming force that could dispel this grim atmosphere. In Hobbes’ view, only a monstrous state can provide sanctuary against these haunting fears. Since membership in such a state acts like an amulet that wards off skulking threats, people would gladly swap their natural, stateless liberty for state-style security.

As with Hobbes’ hobgoblin world where demons prowl, people now think that psychos stalk the streets on Halloween night, waiting in the shadows to devour children. Halloween has become a day when worrywart parents fear for their kids’ safety. Much like Hobbes, adults spin webs of spooky stories describing a society plagued by frightful dangers, particularly during the fevered frenzy of Halloween: stories about poisoned candy; apples laced with razor blades; maniacs waiting to snatch children. And like Hobbes’ chilling story about the nightmare world that reigns without civil government, this Halloween world where fiends undertake sinister deeds after dark is just an urban legend.

After years of careful study, Joel Best, a professor of sociology, found that no trick-or-treater has ever been poisoned by candy. Another group of scholars who researched predatory threats on All Hallows Eve published a report that said, “We almost called this paper, ‘Halloween: The Safest Day of the Year,’ because it was just so incredibly rare to see anything happen on that day.”

Despite the facts, killjoy adults want to schedule trick-or-treat during daylight hours. The adult world tends to have this vampiric effect of sucking the lifeblood out of childhood fun in the name of safety.

When fear becomes reason’s puppet master, people will sacrifice liberty for security. And as the masters of security sink their fangs deeper and deeper into private lives, people assume those puncture wounds are the price we pay for freedom. If Hobbes’ sovereign authority wants to hex the public, and keep people “all in awe,” it must continually remind them of the hellish bloodbath that awaits when the state vanishes.

In such a state, local news would splatter gory crimes across television screens every night. Morning shows and 24-hour news networks would focus on missing children stories. Airports would repeatedly announce terror threat level reports while invading your privacy and searching your body in the name of security. These unnerving sights would make us suspect each other of being Jekyll-and-Hydes, and keep us trapped in our houses, where we deadbolt our doors and shiver at television’s macabre portrayal of society.

This witch’s brew of hair-raising tales casts its spell over the public mind, making us fear each other, thus preventing community from forming.

But nothing arouses goosebumps like the specter of Halloween night. Even Jean Buadrillard, a radically progressive philosopher believes that there is nothing funny about Halloween. “This sarcastic festival reflects, rather, an infernal demand for revenge by children on the adult world,” said Buadrillard. No, it doesn’t. If anything, it’s about having fun and delighting in the scary.

Sure, Halloween celebrates the ghastly and ghoulish, but it does so within the context of creativity and communal engagement. It unleashes our wicked imagination in a way that brings together an intergenerational mix of people, face-to-face, neighbor to neighbor, in a peaceful, collective activity. We gather outside and mingle among our fellow townsfolk. This generates a real sense of community that will keep us safer than any sovereign or set of laws could.

To rob children of nighttime trick-or-treat is a grave mistake. Trick-or-treat isn’t only about reaping gobs of candy in old pillowcases and plastic pumpkin pails. There’s an ineffable thrill to seeing the silhouettes of scythes and hoods, pitchforks and horns, witch hats and broomsticks, capes and wings, all set against a burnt orange dusk; and to hear the crinkle of dead leaves beneath eager footsteps, and the howl and cackle of laughter echo along dark walkways under the ghostly moonlight of late October. Only at night can you feel the full effect of porches lit by the eerie glow of a jack-o-lantern’s grin.

If you schedule trick-or-treat during the daytime, you take the darkness out of Halloween, and the darkness is what makes it special… even sacred.

Unfortunately, society has grown accustomed to trading what is sacred for a sliver of (oppressive) security. As Benjamin Franklin famously said, “They who can give up essential liberty to obtain a little temporary safety, deserve neither liberty nor cable television.”

People tend to believe whatever spine-tingling tale authority conjures. Kids believe adults who warn them that Halloween is a cursed night of terrifying beasts and phantoms, and adults believe state officials who convince them that, as Hobbes said, “man is wolf to man.”

People should worry about defending themselves against a fear-mongering state, not the bogeymen it creates. A tight-knit community, like the one that’s reanimated on Halloween night, is precisely the talisman that repels bloodthirsty night stalkers and drains the power of a fear-mongering state. Until we learn that lesson, we’ll continue whistling past the graveyard of lost liberties.

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