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Government "Intervention:" A Deceptive Label

Only the human animal uses words, but he does so in an endless flow and for a variety of purposes. Words not only communicate factual information. They also impel, repel, encourage, rebuke—and deceive.

This commentary relates to, and deplores, the use of one word in discussions of economic policy, including that for agriculture. It is *intervention*.

All too often the government's role in the economy is referred to as intervention, as though government were an outsider that sticks its nose where it does not belong. The inference is incorrect. In our way of doing things today, government is deeply involved in economic matters; it is a part of our economy. To say it *intervenes* is wrong, deceptively wrong.

The word creates a negative effect, and sometimes is used deliberately for that purpose. A word can do that. Intervention can be what Stanford Professor Roger Gray calls a "snarl word." It is intended to turn people sour. What is even worse, dubbing government actions as intervention invites irresponsibility in public affairs, as it seems to call just for pulling out rather than facing up to problems and trying to solve them.

Politicians are the worst offenders in using language for emotional effect, but many economists are not far behind. A stream of articles, often originating in conservative think-tanks, address government intervention in the economy. However, even economists in USDA's Economic Research Service, who ought to know better, got into the act. The Agency published a number of studies examining what it calls "government intervention in the farm economy" of several countries.

It is appealing to call government nonessential, so that anything it does gets the intervention label. It's the Bible's Garden of Eden image, or Dryden's "noble savage...wild in the woods" who was "free as nature" before "the base laws of servitude began." In this delusive view, human beings are implicitly virtuous, and would get along famously if left alone—if no one intervened.

That doctrine is the rationale for absolute and un-

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checked individualism. The libertarians of our day adhere to the dogma.

But this kind of doctrine is all a dream. From earliest times social rules and instruments have been necessary to check man's aggressions, protect the defenseless, and carry out activities that can only be done jointly. They are still necessary.

The columnist George Will has noted that Americans "need periodic reminders that their individual pursuits of happiness are utterly dependent upon...habits of civility...[and] the functioning of civic, collective community institutions—government."

In all modern nations government is part of the social fabric. In the economic sphere its most essential and pervasive role is to enforce contracts. It is hard to see how anyone can call that function *intervention*.

It is scarcely necessary to remind of the many ways government enters into the economy and daily life. Government provides schools, a postal service, roads. It keeps poisons out of food, stops airplanes from colliding as they approach airport runways, and blocks infectious diseases, like foot-and-mouth of cattle, from entering the country.

Americans have willingly chosen to use government to protect themselves against the destitution of unemployment, illness, and old age. In agriculture, government offers not only minimum commodity price supports but market information, financial aid for electrification, and the right to form cooperatives.

To tag these government activities with the pejorative term *intervention* is patently wrong. And to let cleverly deceptive language lure us into irresolution is dangerous.

The problems of today demand responsible action, and the language of wisdom, insight, foresight, even courage. *Intervention* should be struck from the vocabulary, especially of economists, and those who continue to use the word deserve whatever variety of rebuke is appropriate for literary transgressions.

An alternate word? Try involvement. Better yet, stop using so many verb-nouns. Government on occasion aids, shelters, restrains, penalizes...almost always, active verbs are better. But, stay away from *intervenes*!