



International Journal of Languages and Culture

Publisher's Home Page: <https://www.svedbergopen.com/>



Short Story

Open Access

Two Men in a Café: A Short Story

Robert W. McGee^{1*}

¹Fayetteville State University, 1200 Murchison Rd, Fayetteville, NC 28301, United States. E-mail: RMcGee3@uncfsu.edu

Article Info

Volume 1, Issue 4, December 2021

Received : 17 October 2021

Accepted : 27 November 2021

Published : 05 December 2021

doi: [10.51483/IJLC.1.4.2021.3-5](https://doi.org/10.51483/IJLC.1.4.2021.3-5)

Abstract

In this short story Leon, a man of African descent, and Pete, a man of unknown ethnicity, are discussing the results of some recent presidential primaries. It appears that a man named Jim, who has won the last two primaries, might become the next president, and Elizabeth, a woman of Samoan descent, might become his vice president. The conversation turns to the views of Jim and Elizabeth on a range of political and economic issues. Leon raises the issue of how income taxes are a modern form of slavery, since they confiscate the fruits of a worker's labor, a view that was expressed by Harvard philosopher Robert Nozick in his book, *Anarchy, State and Utopia*, and by Frederick Douglass, a former slave.

Keywords: *Taxation, Theft, Income Tax, Slavery, Nozick, Frederick Douglass, Economic Policy, Health Care, Education, Tax Freedom Day, Fair Share, Affirmative Action, Wealth Tax, Estate Tax, Short Story*

© 2021 Robert W. McGee. This is an open access article under the CC BY license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license, and indicate if changes were made.

Leon, what did you think of that primary? It looks like Jim Vrana might actually have a shot at the presidency.”
“Yeah, it certainly looks that way. He’s promising a lot of free stuff. Free health care. Free education. Subsidized food prices. Rent control for the poor. Sort of like what my ancestors got back on the plantation in the 1850s.”

“Leon, there’s no comparison of today’s government to the slave masters of the nineteenth century.”

“No? You don’t think so?” He pondered a bit before continuing. “I suppose you have a point. The slave master provided free food, shelter, clothing and enough medical care to keep the slaves alive. The government is only *promising* free health care, and they’re not promising free shelter or clothing, just subsidized shelter and food.

“Leon, that’s not a good comparison at all. The government just wants to make sure that poor people get the help they need.”

“Yeah, right. Free education just means that the working-class and middle-class people who don’t go to college are forced to pay for the education of the middle- and upper-class people who do go to college. How is that fair?”

“Leon, you’ve got it all wrong. Jim Vrana just wants the rich to pay their fair share. Elizabeth Valea argued for the same thing during the debates. What do you think of her? She came in second in the last two primaries. Do you think she has a shot at becoming the vice president?”

* Corresponding author: Robert W. McGee, Fayetteville State University, 1200 Murchison Rd, Fayetteville, NC 28301, United States. E-mail: RMcGee3@uncfsu.edu

“Yeah, Pete, she probably does. She checks off all the boxes – female, Samoan, promises more free stuff than anyone in the opposition party. I’m surprised she’s not winning all the primaries.”

Pete takes a sip of his coffee. “Yeah, I’m a little surprised at that, too.”

Leon smiles. “Did you notice that neither of them has had any experience in the real world. Both of them got government jobs right out of law school and never worked a day in the private sector.”

Pete shakes his head. “That’s not relevant. All that matters is their position on policies. She’s really forceful on that fair share argument. The rich don’t pay their fair share.”

Leon smirks. “What is fair share, anyway? I’m paying about 40% of my income in taxes if you count the federal, state and local income tax, sales tax, property tax, and all those hidden taxes that you never see. And let’s not forget the Social Security tax. Everyone who works has to pay that, even if they don’t earn enough to pay the income tax. And then there’s the inflation tax. Everyone has to pay that one, too, even poor people.”

“Leon, you’re starting to sound like the lyrics to that Beatle song.”

“Taxman? Yeah, maybe I am sounding like that song – ‘There’s one for you, 19 for me. Should 5% appear too small? Be thankful I don’t take it all.’ “

“It’s not like that, Leon. The government doesn’t take that much. It will never take that much.”

“Actually, Pete, it has taken that much in the past. The top federal income tax rate was over 90% in the 1950s, and it was 70 into the early 1980s. And that doesn’t even include the state and local income taxes, the property taxes and the sales taxes. Back in the 1950s, some people paid more than 100% of their marginal income in taxes if you count up all of the taxes they paid.”

“Yeah, but that was only a few people. Taxes will never get that high again.”

“How can you be sure, Pete? Elizabeth Valea is talking about a wealth tax to pile on top of the income tax, and she wants to increase the estate tax percent, and drop the exempt amount so that even middle-class farmers and business owners will have to pay something—their fair share. That doesn’t sound fair to me. It sounds like she wants to be the new slave master.”

“Leon, you’re going way overboard on this. There’s no way that government can be compared to a slave master. Taxation isn’t theft. It’s what we pay to live in a civilized society. We live in a democracy. We get to choose our leaders. Slaves couldn’t do that. If we don’t like it, we can leave. We can vote with our feet. Slaves couldn’t do that. They were stuck on the plantation.”

Leon chuckled, and shook his head. “Yeah, Pete, you’re right. Slaves had 100% of the fruits of their labor confiscated, whereas today we only have maybe 40 or 50 or 60% of the fruits of our labor confiscated. So we’re only a slave to the government for four or five or six months a year instead of twelve months. That’s a big improvement. Slaves couldn’t choose their slave masters, whereas today we can choose our slave masters by the democratic process. Slaves couldn’t leave the plantation, whereas we get to choose which slave master taxes us. We can move to a different state, but we still have to pay federal taxes. And we still have to pay federal taxes even if we move to a different country. Big difference. Sometimes the slave master allowed the slaves to buy their freedom. We can buy our freedom, too. We can give up our American citizenship, but we have to pay an exit fee to the government, but then we get taxed by the elected slave masters of some other country, but maybe at a lower rate. It’s a big improvement over slavery. “

“You know, Pete, I’ve been thinking. It’s gotten to the point where the federal government is doing more *to* us than it’s doing *for* us. I read that the top 1% is paying more than 40% of all income taxes, and that the top 50% are paying more than 97% of all income taxes. Maybe they need a tax cut. Maybe we should establish a maximum tax so that nobody has to pay more than a certain amount. That wouldn’t end the exploitation, but it would at least reduce it. And it would help reduce the number of people who are paying more than their fair share.”

“I don’t think that would be feasible, Leon. If we gave those people a tax cut, the federal government wouldn’t have enough money to pay for everything. It needs that money to pay the bills.”

“I’m not so sure about that, Pete. You know, we didn’t have a federal income tax before 1913, and we did just fine. Some states, like Florida and Texas, don’t have an income tax and they’re doing just fine, too.”

“I don’t know, Leon. If they abolished the federal income tax, how would they get the funds they need to operate?”

“Well, Pete, maybe they’d just have to cut back on spending. We’re sending billions of dollars to other countries in foreign aid. We’re subsidizing the defense of Europe. The last time I checked, World War II ended in 1945. I don’t see

why we have to keep subsidizing those European armies. Let them pay for their own defense. Let them pay their fair share.”

Leon looked at his watch. “Well, Pete, I’ve got to go. Gotta be at work in 20 minutes. I’ll earn 200 dollars today and I’ll get to keep 120 of it. Have a nice day.”

“You, too, Leon.”

Note to the non-American readers: There is a good reason why the author chose to call the presidential candidate Jim Vrana. “Vrana” means “crow” in the Bulgarian language. “Jim Crow” was the term used to describe the laws that were passed after the American Civil War (1861-1865) to deny the recently freed slaves their rights as citizens.

References

- Douglass, Frederick. (2012). *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*. Simon & Brown.
- Douglass, Frederick. (1855/2014). *My Bondage and My Freedom*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Ives, Dave. (n.d.). *What Did Frederick Douglass Teach me About Income Tax?* <https://ivesguy.com/what-did-frederick-douglass-teach-me-about-income-tax/>
- Jarvis, Joe. (2017). *Why Taxation is Slavery: Words from Frederick Douglass*. *Truth Comes to Light*. April 26. <https://truthcomestolight.com/why-taxation-is-slavery-words-from-frederick-douglass/>
- Nozick, Robert. (1974). *Anarchy, State & Utopia*: New York: Basic Books.
- Tucker, Jeffrey A. (2016). *Frederick Douglass, Tax Rebel*. FEE Stories, Foundation for Economic Education, July 29. <https://fee.org/articles/frederick-douglass-tax-rebel/>

Supplemental Reading

- McGee, Robert W. (1998). *The Case for a Maximum Tax: A Look at Some Legal, Economic and Ethical Issues*. *Journal of Accounting, Ethics & Public Policy*, 1(2), 294-299. Reprinted at <http://ssrn.com/abstract=2997137> and elsewhere.
- McGee, Robert W. (2004). *The Philosophy of Taxation and Public Finance*. Boston, Dordrecht and London: Kluwer Academic Publishers.
- McGee, Robert W. (2004). *Is Taxation Theft? The Question of Consent*. In Robert W. McGee, *The Philosophy of Taxation and Public Finance* (pp. 33-39). Boston, Dordrecht and London: Kluwer Academic Publishers.
- McGee, Robert W. (2012). *Four Views on the Ethics of Tax Evasion*. In Robert W. McGee (ed.), *The Ethics of Tax Evasion: Perspectives in Theory and Practice* (pp. 3-33). New York: Springer.
- McGee, Robert W. (2021). *Elon Musk and the Case for a Maximum Tax*. Working Paper, December 26. DOI: 10.13140/RG.2.2.25744.94722 and https://www.academia.edu/66044245/ELON_MUSK_AND_THE_CASE_FOR_A_MAXIMUM_TAX and <http://ssrn.com/abstract=3994059>
- Tax Foundation. (2022). *Tax Freedom Day*. Washington, DC: Tax Foundation. <https://taxfoundation.org/publications/tax-freedom-day/>
- York, Erica. (2021). *Summary of the Latest Federal Income Tax Data, 2021 Update*. Washington, DC: The Tax Foundation. <https://taxfoundation.org/publications/latest-federal-income-tax-data/>

Cite this article as: Robert W. McGee (2021). *Two Men in a Café: A Short Story*. *International Journal of Languages and Culture*. 1(4), 3-5. doi:10.51483/IJLC.1.4.2021.3-5.