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HEADLINE: Distortions that don't ease the agony

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BODY:

Alan Keyes, a candidate for the Republican presidential nomination, says that the income tax is a slave tax and that Americans are slaves. He is correct.

A slave is a person who does not own his own labor. After paying the income tax, successful Americans retain no more of the income they produce than 19th century slaves - and considerably less than medieval serfs.

The maximum that could be extracted from a medieval serf was one-third - an amount extracted today by the combination of the payroll tax and the bottom rung of the federal income tax. Add in state sales and income taxes, and it is apparent Americans are not a proud, free people.

Our Founding Fathers knew an income tax was a slave tax, and they forbade it. It required a constitutional amendment - the 16th - to make us slaves.

Republicans permitted the constitutional amendment to go forward because they believed most of the states would vote it down. The states did not vote it down, as few of the states had people with incomes high enough to be subject to the tax.

The tax seemed tailored to hit a few wealthy Northeastern states - the very states people blamed for high tariffs.

This bit of "getting even" backfired, as it wasn't long before the income thresholds were lowered and the tax rates raised. The income tax net was refashioned to catch us all.

An income tax is different from other taxes. An income tax gives government a claim to your labor, just as a slave owner had a claim to the slave's labor.

A slave who withheld his labor was likely to be punished. He would be put on short rations or whipped. If one of us today withholds from the Internal Revenue Service, the punishment is more severe - several years in prison.

The slave tax is very expensive in other ways. It takes 6.1 billion hours - more than 3 million man-years - to comply with the slave tax. In dollar terms, it costs us slaves an additional \$200 billion to comply with a 2,840-page tax code - more than twice the number of pages as the Bible and more than three times the words. The federal tax rules interpreting the code come to 46,000 pages.

The complexity is so great that it is easy to make a mistake and be subjected to "enforcement action." There are 481 separate IRS tax forms for 1999, an increase of 20 percent from 1990. Last year, the IRS received 110 million telephone calls asking for help in understanding the rules. The IRS did not know the answer 27 percent of the time. Consequently, more than half of us tax slaves hire experts to prepare our slave-tax returns.

The Joint Economic Committee of Congress, chaired by Sen. Connie Mack, Florida Republican, has prepared a "Tax Complexity Factbook." It is available online at www.jec.senate.gov.

You might say we Americans are nothing like slaves and that nothing happens to us as long as we do our duty and pay our taxes.

The same thing can be said about 19th century slaves. So long as they worked at a reasonable pace, they had room and board and clothes on their backs.

Judging from the number of IRS enforcement actions, a larger proportion of tax slaves get in trouble today than in the 19th century.

At least a 19th century slave could run away, but where can we go?

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