

Mike NICHOLS



Take this money or else

Uncle Sam's 'economic dragooning' of the states has to stop

Unless you read from back to front — the sort of bass-ackwards approach anti-Common Core zealots probably fear if the federal government gains more power over how we educate our kids — you've already seen Michael J. Petrilli's piece on page 12 of this magazine.

The main concern of most opponents, the president of the Fordham Institute and Common Core supporter rightly points out, is "the unfortunate role of the federal government in encouraging — some would say coercing — the states to adopt the Common Core via the \$4 billion Race to the Top initiative."

Most conservatives would be just fine with the standards, in other words, if they didn't think they were somehow forced upon the states and local schools by a federal "gun to the head."

Yeah, I know, that's a jarring image that surely simplifies a complicated issue down to the level of pulp fiction. Except that the author of those words was hardly Raymond Chandler. It was John Roberts. The U.S. Supreme Court chief justice used the same language in *National Federation of Independent Business v. Sebelius*, the Obamacare case, when he concluded that the Affordable Care Act's attempt to financially coerce states into expanding Medicaid violated the Constitution's Spending Clause.

"In this case, the financial 'inducement' that Congress has chosen is much more than 'relatively mild encouragement' — it is a gun to the head," wrote Roberts. Using only slightly less colorful language, the court also called the Obama administration's approach an "economic dragooning."

Get your hands up — er, out — or else!

The Supreme Court found Obamacare's attempt to force Medicaid expansion unconstitutional — a good thing for anyone concerned about state independence. States should at least have a choice in this stuff. Federal

dragooning isn't confined to Medicaid expansion, though. Total federal grants to state and local governments grew from just \$7 billion in 1960 prior to Lyndon Johnson's Great Society to \$641 billion today and now make up about one-sixth of the federal budget.

Lots of people love this. Federal money is "free" after all, isn't it? Our beneficent federal politicians shower it all over the folks back home and are paid back in votes. And why would we locals turn down manna from federal heaven when we know the feds will just use it someplace else?

Federal grants-in-aid are anything but free. Many serve a valid purpose. But they can also drive up federal and state spending, taxes and debt. They often "come freighted with detailed federal directives that deprive state and local

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officials of the ability to meet their own responsibilities in their own ways," to borrow the words of James Buckley in his recent book, *Saving Congress from Itself: Emancipating the States & Empowering Their People*. They often make it impossible to hold anyone accountable. Growing numbers of conservatives are increasingly wary of federal money for all those reasons — even when the money is for something like Common Core, the sort of national standard that is necessary for a state that has fallen badly behind. Opponents of Common Core concerned

about federal usurpation of local flexibility have latched onto the right argument, in other words, but the wrong issue.

As Petrilli puts it, "If the primary conservative criticism of the Common Core is not their content, but their entanglement with the federal government, the best solution is not to dump the standards but to break up with the feds."

And then, I would add, examine all the other instances where the federal government is sending far too much money — attached to far too many strings — out to states that were long ago envisioned as taking precedence over a centralized authority.

The truth is that nowadays the states are too often merely an extension of the federal government. And that — no matter what you think about Common Core — really is bass-ackwards.

Mike Nichols is the president of WPRI.