

Basis of Liberty

BY DEAN RUSSELL

In one of his fables Aesop said: “A horse and a stag, feeding together in a rich meadow, began fighting over which should have the best grass. The stag with his sharp horns got the better of the horse. So the horse asked the help of man. And man agreed, but suggested that his help might be more effective if he were permitted to ride the horse and guide him as he thought best. So the horse permitted man to put a saddle on his back and a bridle on his head. Thus they drove the stag from the meadow. But when the horse asked man to remove the bridle and saddle and set him free, man answered, ‘I never before knew what a useful drudge you are. And now that I have found what you are good for, you may rest assured that I will keep you to it.’ ”

The Roman philosopher and poet Horace said of this fable: “This is the case of him, who, dreading poverty, parts with that invaluable jewel, Liberty; like a wretch as he is, he will be always subject to a tyrant of some sort or other, and be a slave forever; because his avaricious spirit knew not how to be contented with that moderate competency, which he might have possessed independent of all the world.”

Ever since man learned to write, one of his favorite subjects has been freedom and liberty. And almost always, it has been his own government that he most feared as the destroyer of his liberty. Further, various economic issues—primarily, the ownership of property and the control of one’s time and labor—have always been listed prominently among the measurements of liberty.

Justice Sutherland of our Supreme Court clearly saw this connection when he said, “[T]he individual . . . has

three rights, equally sacred from arbitrary interference [from government]: the right to his life, the right to his liberty, and the right to his property. These three rights are so bound together as to be essentially one right. To give a man his life, but deny him his liberty, is to take from him all that makes his life worth living. To give him his liberty, but to take from him the property which is the fruit and badge of his liberty, is still to leave him a slave.”

Frédéric Bastiat, the French political economist of the last century, phrased the same idea another way: “Life, liberty, and property do not exist because men have made laws. On the contrary, it was the fact that life, liberty, and property existed beforehand that caused men to make laws in the first place.”

A primary lesson of history is that liberty generally flourishes when goods are privately owned and distributed. I can find no example of real freedom for the people over a significant period of time when the means of production were mostly owned by the government, or by a restricted and self-perpetuating group who controlled the powers of government. In addition, material prosperity for the people in general has surged forward whenever the production and distribution of goods and services have been determined by the automatic processes of competition in a free market. And prosperity has faltered (and often failed completely) whenever governmental controls over the economic activities of the people have grown onerous. . . .



The late Dean Russell was a long-time member of FEE's staff and the author of Frédéric Bastiat: Ideas and Influence, The TVA Idea, and The Conscription Idea. This article originally appeared in the Rockford (Illinois) Morning Star in January 1962 and in The Freeman in July 1962.