



## An Inspiration for All Time

**M**ost lovers of liberty want to be optimists. All that has to happen for liberty to be widely embraced is for people to open their minds and shed the baggage of the socialist impulse. Simple enough, right? No. It isn't simple at all, and that's why too many lovers of liberty fall into the pessimism trap.

If winning the day for liberty were simple, we'd have won overwhelmingly—and permanently—long ago. Alas, it takes work. It takes time. It takes commitment. It entails setbacks along the way. I've always believed that in spite of all that it has to offer, liberty enters the intellectual fray with a substantial disadvantage: Liberty demands risk and restraint today in exchange for a better life a little later. Socialism and the endless interventionist schemes that push society in that direction appeal far more to thoughtless but immediate self-gratification.

Think about it. Mere slogans and bumper stickers carry instant weight with the naturally large numbers of people who want something now and think they should have it. Our side has to take the time to explain, to invoke reason, logic, history, and economics. We will always have to work harder to achieve liberty than the other side has to work to achieve the redistributive state, because liberty demands that we live like mature adults who respect one another.

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*Lawrence Reed (Reed@mackinac.org) is president of the Mackinac Center for Public Policy (www.mackinac.org), a free-market research and educational organization in Midland, Michigan.*

If you know many advocates of liberty these days, you know what I mean when I say there's plenty of pessimism to go around. I hear it all the time, and it goes something like this: "The schools and universities are havens of statist thinking. Too many of the bad guys win elections. Government continues to grow in spite of its failings. What have we got to show for all the seeds of liberty we've planted? Maybe we should just throw in the towel, have a good time, and let the chips fall where they may."

Such pessimism is a crippling mental handicap. It's a self-fulfilling, surefire prescription for losing. If you think the cause is lost, that's the way you'll behave and you'll drag others down with you. If you believe in liberty but can't muster an optimistic attitude, then find inspiration or get out of the way.

Whenever I sense a whiff of pessimism in my thinking, I shake it in a hurry by recalling the lives and contributions of great individuals who overcame seemingly insurmountable obstacles to eventually prevail. I can hardly recommend a more fitting example to make my point here than William Wilberforce, the man from Yorkshire who more than any other single individual was responsible for ending slavery throughout the British empire.

Born in 1759, Wilberforce never had the physical presence one would hope to possess in a fight. Boswell called him a "shrimp." Thin and short, Wilberforce compensated with a powerful vision, an appealing eloquence, and an indomitable will.

Elected to Parliament in 1780 at the age of 21, Wilberforce spoke out against the war with America in no uncertain terms, labeling it “cruel, bloody and impractical.” But he drifted from issue to issue without a central focus until a conversion to Christianity sparked what would be a lifelong calling. Revolted by the hideous barbarity of the slave trade then prevalent in the world, he determined in October 1787 to work for its abolition.

## A Tall Order

Abolitionism was a tall order in the late 1700s. Viewed widely at the time as integral to British naval and commercial success, slavery was big business. It enjoyed broad political support, as well as widespread (though essentially racist) intellectual justification. For 75 years before Wilberforce set about to end the trade in slaves, and ultimately slavery itself, Britain enjoyed the sole right by treaty to supply Spanish colonies with captured Africans. The trade was lucrative for British slavers but savagely merciless for its millions of victims.

Wilberforce labored relentlessly for his cause, forming and assisting organizations to spread the word about the inhumanity of one man’s owning another. “Our motto must continue to be perseverance,” he once told followers. And what a model of perseverance he was! He endured and overcame just about every obstacle imaginable, including ill health, derision from his colleagues, and defeats almost too numerous to count.

He rose in the House of Commons to give his first abolition speech in 1789, not knowing that it would take another 18 years before the slave trade would be ended by law. Every year he would introduce an abolition measure, and every year it would go nowhere. At least once, some of his own allies deserted him because the opposition gave them free tickets to attend the theatre

during a crucial vote. The war with France that began in the 1790s often put the slavery issue on the back burner. A bloody slave rebellion in the Caribbean seemed to give ammunition to the other side. Wilberforce was often ridiculed and condemned as a traitorous rabble-rouser. He had reason to fear for his life.

Once, in 1805 after yet another defeat in Parliament, Wilberforce was advised by a clerk of the Commons to give up the fight. He replied with the air of undying optimism that had come to characterize his stance on the issue: “I do expect to carry it.”

Indeed, what seemed once to be an impossible dream became reality in 1807. Abolition of the slave trade won Parliament’s overwhelming approval. Biographer David J. Vaughan reports that “as the attorney general, Sir Samuel Romilly, stood and praised the perseverance of Wilberforce, the House rose to its feet and broke out in cheers. Wilberforce was so overcome with emotion that he sat head in hand, tears streaming down his face.” Boswell’s shrimp had become a whale.

The trade in slaves was officially over, but ending slavery itself remained the ultimate prize. To bring it about, Wilberforce worked for another 26 years, even after he left behind nearly a quarter-century of service in Parliament in 1825. The great day finally came on July 26, 1833, when Britain enacted a peaceful emancipation (with compensation to slaveholders) and became the world’s first major nation to unshackle an entire race within its jurisdiction. Hailed as the hero who made it possible, Wilberforce died three days later.

The lessons of Wilberforce’s life reduce to this: A worthy goal should always inspire. Don’t let any setback slow you up. Maintain an optimism worthy of the goal itself, and do all within your character and power to rally others to the cause. How on earth could men and women of good conscience ever do otherwise? □