

From the President

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There Is No Central Plan for Winning Liberty

People who become enthusiastic supporters of the freedom philosophy often ask how the case for individual liberty, free markets, and constitutionally limited government can be successfully spread across the land. How can it triumph over the prevailing system of governmental paternalism?

In frustration and despair they point out that the interventionist-welfare state has its advocates and indoctrinators everywhere in society. Whether they are in the government-run schools, or on the television news shows and in the pages of newspapers and mass-circulation magazines, or in the pulpits of too many of our churches, or in armies of special-interest groups feeding at the trough of government spending—no matter where we turn the supporters of intrusive, regulating, redistributive government dominate the arena of ideas and the battlefield of politics.

To defeat these forces of political coercion and control, it is sometimes said, we have to devise a strategy and plan of action to which all friends of freedom must apply themselves. In other words, it is implied that the proponents of limited government and the free-market society must design a central plan for winning liberty in which everyone must find his place, like a cog in the machinery advancing the cause of freedom.


In fact, there is not, nor can there be, such a central plan for winning liberty. We need

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to remember why socialist central planning was unworkable and inevitably bound to fail. During the heyday of collectivism in the first half of the twentieth century, free-market economists like Ludwig von Mises and F. A. Hayek swam against the intellectual and ideology currents of the time and showed that socialism lacked the ability to solve the most fundamental of economic problems. They explained that no matter how well-intentioned, knowledgeable, and wise we might assume the central planners to be, they could never have sufficient information and insight to know all they'd need to know to plan all the economic activities of all the people in any contemporary society.

Hayek, in particular, emphasized that in any society in which there is a division of labor there is, by necessity, a matching division of knowledge. Through such a system of specialization, we respectively become informed, knowledgeable, and expert about, at most, a handful of things, while remaining ignorant about all the other aspects of life on which our social, intellectual, and material well-being depends. The superiority of the free market is that it leaves each individual at liberty to apply his knowledge, abilities, and creativity as he sees fit, yet at the same time succeeds in coordinating all that everyone does through the incentives of profit and loss and the communication network of the competitively generated price system.

How, then, can we ever expect to win liberty through central planning? We would be handicapping all our efforts by subordinat-



ing them to the knowledge, wisdom, and insight of those who would construct the blueprint to which the rest of us would be required to more or less conform. The goal of establishing the free society can never be achieved through the application of such collectivist methods.

The methodology of winning freedom was a topic to which Leonard Read, the founder of FEE, devoted a lot of his attention over the decades. He reminded us that the one over whom we each have the most influence is oneself. To succeed in this battle of ideas we must begin with a process of self-education. Each of us, to the best of our abilities, must learn and master the meaning of freedom in its various social, economic, and political aspects. This also requires us to clearly comprehend the meaning of collectivism, regardless of whether it is called socialism, communism, fascism, interventionism, welfare-statism, the “middle way,” or “liberalism.”

Know What You’re Talking About

The more and better educated we are in the philosophies of freedom and collectivism, the more and better we can articulate the case for individual liberty and identify any proposal or policy that promulgates political paternalism. Furthermore, the greater our knowledge and power of articulation in these matters, the more we will seem the type of person that others may be interested in listening to and learning from. No one turns to someone who seems not to know what he is talking about, or who cannot persuasively explain the issues involved in any discussion.

Since none of us can become masters of everything, each of us must find that niche where our interest, inclination, and ability give us the greatest comparative advantage. And where, precisely, is that niche? Each person must answer that for himself, some-

times discovering it only through trial and error.

We also need to appreciate that the same argument for freedom will not work equally on every person we talk to. There is no single button to push to get others to see the cogency of the freedom philosophy. Some will find persuasive an argument about the “fundamental rights of man.” Others may be more like the man from Missouri, who says “show me.” For such a person, a more “utilitarian” argument about the market’s ability to “deliver the goods” or handle various “social problems” better than any form of state intervention will carry greater persuasive force. Still others might be more easily reasoned with by historical examples of how free markets and free men have successfully operated in the past, compared to government control and regulation in more contemporary times.

In responding to people in discussion or debate, each of us must find that arena of ideas in which we feel most comfortable and knowledgeable. Likewise, each of us must find those people in our circle of friends, family members, co-workers, and associates who seem most likely to be open and receptive to what we have to say. Surely, no one can know this other than each of us as individuals in our respective corners of society.

Leonard Read also reminded us that no one likes it if it seems that something is being pushed down his throat. Our enthusiasm for making the case for freedom should be tempered with patience and appreciation that for many the full implications of freedom and responsibility take time to absorb and accept.

At the end of the day, if freedom is achieved it will be done by winning over enough people one person at a time through reason, persuasion, and example. It is not an easy task, but it is the only way that is consistent with the principles of freedom we hold so dear. □