

# I'd Push the Button—To Establish Freedom Right Now

BY RICHARD M. EBELING



In April 1946, a month after the late Leonard E. Read established the Foundation for Economic Education, he gave a talk in Detroit called “I’d Push the Button.” He said that if there were a button on the podium that would immediately abolish all controls and regulations on the U.S. economy, he would push it. With the pressure of one finger he would gladly transform America into a society of free men associating with each other on the basis of voluntary exchange, with government limited to the protection of life, liberty, and property.

When Read said this almost 60 years ago there were very few advocates of a truly free market in America. Both in the United States and around the world, collectivism was on the rise. There was a strong presumption that socialism and the interventionist welfare state were the necessary and inevitable future for mankind.

Today far more people express their support for the market economy and point out the hazards of “big government.” They often cogently demonstrate the failure and corruption of political manipulation of society. And they say the “private sector” is the key to real and lasting solutions to our social problems.

However, we almost never hear voices declaring a desire to “push the button.” Indeed, what passes for “deregulation” or market-based reform has almost no relation to Read’s principled call for *laissez faire*.

Whether the policy issue is the coming crisis in Social Security, or the failure of public education, or the supposed environmental apocalypse, or the claimed threat from mass immigration into America, or the fear of jobs and business lost to foreign competition, the proposed “fixes” all entail a continuing intrusion of political power into the peaceful affairs of the citizenry.

Let’s look at two examples.

For 70 years the government has asserted its right and duty to plan the retirement of the American people through a compulsory pension system perversely called Social Security. Now, finally, the game is almost up, with not enough people in the working-age population to subsidize all the retirees who have been promised a certain level of income in their later years. However, rather than admit that it’s all been a fraud and simply end this

forced intergenerational redistribution of wealth, even the pro-market advocates merely propose various tweaks of the system: raise the retirement age, lower the promised benefits, and allow Americans to “invest” a portion of their plundered money into government-approved mutual-fund accounts.

This is not freedom; it is merely a continuation of the same old compulsory system under different rules and regulations. What might a real market

reform look like? Well, one possibility would be to just abolish Social Security. The government directly owns more than one quarter of all the land in the United States. The land could be sold off at public auctions over a period of time with the proceeds being disbursed to Social Security recipients in descending order beginning with the oldest recipients. The payments would equal what the government robbed from them over the decades.

With Social Security taxes gone and millions of acres of formerly government-owned land transferred into the productive hands of private individuals, those who have been victimized by the system and who cannot make ends meet would and could rely on the generosi-

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ty of good people—just as it was before Social Security was imposed in the 1930s as part of FDR's New Deal.

## Failed Schools

Many Americans are also frustrated and disappointed with the failure of and imposed “political correctness” in the government monopoly school system, perversely called “public” education. The shift into private schools and the growth of home-schooling demonstrate how much people desire to take greater control of and responsibility for their children's education. More and more parents are making this financial sacrifice in spite of the tax load with which the government burdens the average American family.

But where are the free-market voices that propose simple abolition of the government's schools? Instead, schemes are devised for vouchers, educational tax credits, and charter schools. The more fundamental question that is left out of these debates and proposals is: why is government in the school business to begin with?

As a number of writers have pointed out, including *Freeman* editor Sheldon Richman in his excellent book *Separating School and State* (1994), government schools began in the United States as a tool for political indoctrination to make all young Americans uniform and obedient “good citizens,”

as defined by the political authorities. This has continued up to the present time. The only thing that is different today from, say, 30 or 40 years ago is what the state curriculum designers consider to be politically correct.

All the often-angry battles over prayer and sex education in the classroom, or evolution versus intelligent design in the biology curriculum, or saying the pledge of allegiance at the start of the school day would disappear if the state school system were fully privatized.

Parents would send their children to the schools that taught the values and offered the curriculum they considered best for preparing them for the trials and opportunities of adult life. Furthermore, privatization would introduce real competitive excellence as schools strove

to attract students at market-determined prices. Under a free-market educational system, rarely would any child be “left behind,” because competition would lower the cost of a good education and private charities would extend opportunities for the less financially fortunate through scholarships and grants.

## Schools on the Auction Block

How could this be brought about? Real market reform would entail privatizing the existing network of government schools. They might be turned over to the existing administrators and teaching staffs, who would become the “stockholders” of the companies. Or they could be auctioned off to private firms desiring to operate a single school or acquire a chain of schools on the market. At the same time, all legal and

regulatory restrictions on operating private schools and all government rules on curriculum and staffing would be abolished.

I am well aware that many in the free-market camp view such proposals as too “radical.” Americans are not ready for such root-and-branch change, it is said. They need to be weaned from government dependency through gradual changes that would make them amenable to more comprehensive free-market reforms down the road.

There are two responses to this argument. First, many of these more “moderate” and “modest” reform proposals actually threaten to entrench state power even more. “Private” investment accounts with Social Security dollars run the risk of politicizing the financial markets even more than at present. And the voucher plan could extend even further the government's rules and regulations to all private schools that accept these political dollars.

Second, unless there are voices unafraid to present clearly and persuasively the principled and uncompromising case for a truly free society, the goal of liberty may never be established. Freedom requires people who call for “pushing the button,” and who demonstrate why it would be good if we could.

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