

EDUCATING FOR FREEDOM

An Interview with Leonard Read

One of the most respected organizations advocating the philosophy of *laissez-faire* is the Foundation for Economic Education (FEE) in Irvington-on-Hudson, New York. For many years FEE has spread the "freedom philosophy" by means of seminars, books, pamphlets, and a monthly magazine, *The Freeman*, founded in 1956. FEE's stated purpose is to champion the ideas of private property, the free market, the profit and loss system, and limited government. Its rationale is that the tide of collectivism can be rolled back only if sufficient people understand and support the principles of freedom. It therefore focuses its efforts on educational ventures, and is incorporated as a nonpolitical, nonprofit foundation.

The founder, president, and guiding influence of FEE and its philosophy of education in freedom is Leonard E. Read. In the summer of 1974, Senior Editor Tibor Machan went to Irvington-on-Hudson to interview Mr. Read. At 11 a.m. Mr. Read was sitting in his spacious office in the FEE mansion, located near the Hudson River on Broadway in midtown Irvington. He is almost always working in this office, as many who have visited FEE would know. (And many people do visit FEE not only to meet the staff, who are virtual household names in libertarian circles, but to browse in FEE's famous library.)

Leonard Read is now in his late 70's but that could only be known from independent sources, not from the looks of him. He is one of the most vigorous people anyone will encounter and is reputed to run up the stairs to his office even these days. His articles, newsletters and his many books have permeated the country. *The Freeman*, FEE's monthly journal, edited by Paul Poirot, is the oldest and most widely distributed periodical with free market orientation (yet considerable diversity of views on matters other than economic). Rand, Branden, Rothbard, Friedman, Mises, Hazlitt, Brozen, Sennholz, Hayek, Poole, Machan, and Armentano are some of the well known libertarians who have contributed to *The Freeman*

at one time or another.

The journal FEE publishes gives one a clear enough flavor of the approach Leonard Read takes to his mission in life. *The Freeman* publishes essays of detailed scholarship as well as folksy anecdotes—just as long as all of these contribute to a better understanding and appreciation of the philosophy of human liberty. In the present interview Mr. Read does not give us many of the details of his thinking—his views are on record, so the interview dealt with issues not elsewhere available. But it should be pointed out that Mr. Read's defense of liberty rests on somewhat different grounds from many of the others who appear in *REASON's* pages. The following passages from the September issue of *Notes from FEE* should provide an introduction to his orientation:

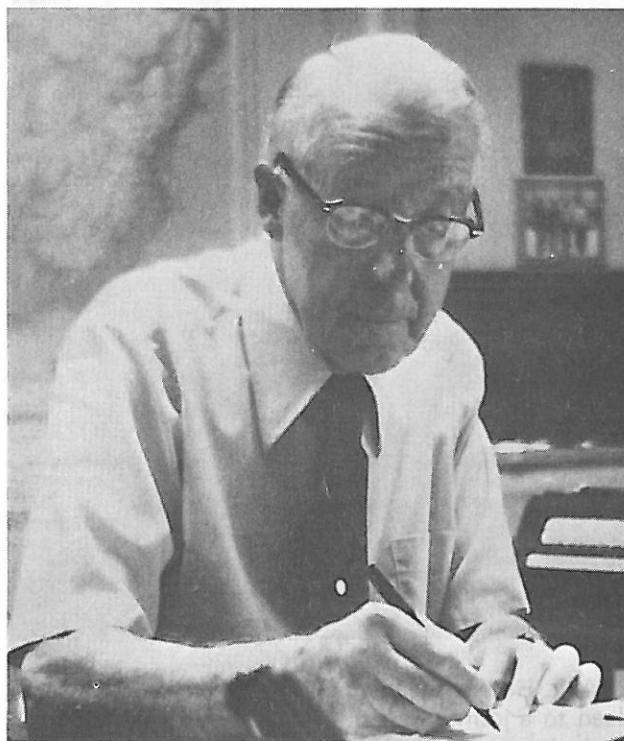
[W]hat is man's earthly purpose? . . . our answer is reasoned from a basic premise . . . founded on three assumptions:

- *Man did not create himself, for it is easily demonstrable that man knows very little about himself. Therefore, my first assumption is the primacy and supremacy of an Infinite Consciousness.*
- *My second assumption is also demonstrable. While difficult, it is possible for the individual to expand his own awareness, perception, consciousness.*
- *My third assumption is a profound belief that the intellect—one's mind—is independent; that is to say, it is not subordinate to the organic matter of which one's body is composed. An inference from this belief is a conviction of the immortality of the human spirit or consciousness, this earthly moment not being all there is to it. It is consciousness that is immortalized, not the body or wealth or fame or any such thing. In a word, consciousness is the reality!*

Many of our readers may disagree with this orientation, nonetheless, it serves to illustrate the multifaceted support enjoyed by the political idea of a free society. Our aim here, as with all of our interviews, is to bring to our readers the individuals providing this kind of support in the context of a candid, unrehearsed conversation with REASON's representatives. Hopefully our interview feature will continue to serve one of REASON's vital functions. So without further ado, we offer our conversation with Mr. Leonard Read.

REASON: Mr. Read, please tell us of your initiation into libertarianism.

READ: My initiation goes back to the year 1933 when I was the Western Manager for the United States Chamber of Commerce. I was so naive that I thought that anything that came out as United States Chamber policy was straight from the horse's mouth. And the United States Chamber in those days was in support of the NIRA—the National Industrial Recovery Act. I got word that a very brilliant businessman, in Los Angeles, was making disparaging references about the U.S. Chamber policy, so I thought it incumbent upon me to call upon him and straighten him out. I called on one W. C. Mullendore, then executive vice president of Southern California Edison Company. I didn't know it at the time but he was one of the most brilliant advocates of our philosophy of any businessman I have ever known. He received me very courteously and let me talk, which I did for half an hour, dwelling upon the virtues of U.S. Chamber policies. When I ran out of breath, Mr. Mullendore took over. Today I would give \$1,000 for a recording of what he said to me in that one hour.



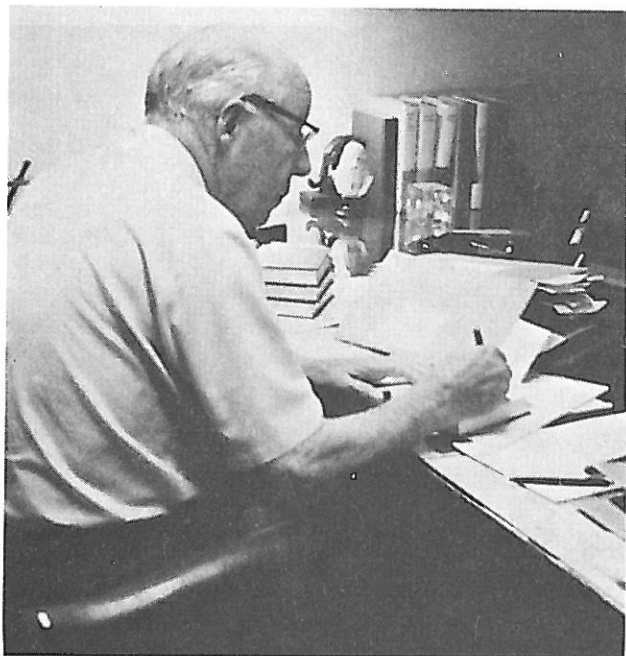
Photos by Marty Zupan

When he was through, I said, "Mr. Mullendore I have never thought of any of these things this way before. I believe you are right." That was my initiation and from that time on it has been an obsession.

REASON: You have said to me privately that you are somewhat dismayed with the word "libertarian" these days. Please tell us why.

READ: Yes. The word "liberal" was once a good term and was used by the classical economists; it meant liberalization of the individual from the tyranny of the state. But the other side took it over, expropriated it, and so I thought we ought to have a new word. And I'm the one who brought out and popularized the word "libertarian," and it's gone all over the world. But there are numerous reasons why I have quit the use of it. Number one, just like the word "liberal," it has been taken over by all sorts of persons, like any good word always is. People all the way from anarchists to out-and-out socialists, have taken it over. So if someone says to me, "What are you, Read?" and I say a libertarian, they will identify me with one of those and it will not be correct. So I have dropped the term and today if someone asks me what I am I reply Leonard Read. And then, if asked, "What do you have in mind in the way of ideology?" my answer is "An ideal." Perhaps a dialogue will begin and I may learn more from him than he will learn from me.

REASON: *The Freeman* is well known and is the oldest publication that has published authors who favor the free society. How did the magazine come into being?



READ: Here is the history. *The Freeman* was a name given to a journal put out in the 1920's by Albert J. Nock; later a journal by the same name was published by the Georgists. In 1939, when I was General Manager of the Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce I set up an ad hoc outfit known as Pamphleteers, Inc. We labeled our booklets, *The Freeman*. Still later, this name was given to a journal of opinion, published in New York. Henry Hazlitt was one of the editors, and later John Chamberlain. Following its failure, we took it over at FEE with Frank Chodorov as editor. We lost a lot of money and gave it up. In 1956 we began the publication of our present monthly magazine—not a journal of opinion but, rather, a journal presenting what we call the free market, private ownership, limited government philosophy with its moral and spiritual antecedents. That's how the present *Freeman* came about.

REASON: You have quite a reputation for being able to gain support for *The Freeman* and your foundation. Is this something that you find an outgrowth of your own philosophy?

READ: We have what really is a novel idea here—it's been mine ever since we started. I made up my mind that I was never going to pass a tin cup. We have never asked anybody for one cent, any more than I have asked you for support. Anyone goes on our mailing list for the asking and I've discovered that about 25 percent of them will become contributors on their initiative, not on our request, and we may be doing better financially than any other organization on our side of the fence. This is a discipline. You see we have to continue to do good work or the support quits and we're out of business and that's what should happen.

REASON: There *is* a little notice that one gets, though, which announces something to the effect that this is the place that one might be able to contribute to the kind of work that you've been doing.

READ: Yes. What we really say is if you desire to do it, here's a form you may fill out. And that's as far as we go. That's all.

REASON: Let me get to a more substantive issue. Would you elaborate some of the key points of your general position, your methodology.

READ: Well, with reference to methodology, it's my thesis (and that of all of us here at FEE) that the advancement of the free market—or the freedom philosophy, as I sometimes call it—is a *learning* rather than a *selling* problem. You see there are so many persons who consider they are on our side of the

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fence simply because they are against the welfare state and the planned economy that's so rapidly taking over. But that does not qualify them. It might be the first step to be against that. But what you have to do is to be *for* something. There has to be something positive. You have to be able, not only to present what's *wrong*, but you have to be able to present what's *right*. It's a learning problem. I am convinced that there's not one of us past or present who has more than scratched the surface in making the case for the free market, private ownership, limited government philosophy.

REASON: What sort of things would have to be added to the case for this philosophy to make it a little more on the winning side?

READ: Where we fall down is this: there is a wisdom in the market which, if I were to say is a trillion times greater than exists in any discreet individual, it would be an understatement. Now that sounds kind of astounding. But how many persons are there—to my knowledge, not one—who is able to explain the wisdom in the market that doesn't exist in a discreet individual? Logically, persuasively, attractively so that other persons who can understand will understand? I tried myself, I do this lecture on the freedom

of the market—I did it yesterday morning—and am doing a little bit better each time, but it is far from where it ought to be. What I'm trying to do is to encourage other persons to explain it better than I can.

REASON: But you're saying that the wisdom is so much greater than is possible for anyone to explain.

READ: It isn't *impossible*. It is a point in excellence which no one of us yet has reached.

REASON: I don't mean to be systematically controversial, but I think these differences are worth bringing out: You would not say that anyone like Ludwig von Mises or F. A. Hayek or Ayn Rand or Milton Friedman has succeeded in explaining, to the best of our human knowledge up to date, what is the wisdom of the market?

READ: Quite. Consider Hayek for example. He's the one who really set me off on this line of thinking back in 1961. We published a piece in *The Freeman* entitled "The Uses of Knowledge in Society" and that inspired me to write my first piece on the miracle of the market. Edmund Burke referred to it as an immemorial heritage. And I like to refer to it as the overall luminosity—that enormous wisdom. Mises or Rand or Read or whoever has not done the adequate job yet in making it clear enough so that other people can understand it. In other words I'm aware of how little I know.

REASON: That's an interesting point. Now we have interviewed a number of people in the profreedom camp and amongst them, almost all turn out to be of the skeptical bent. Their position is that we know so little of what goes on that perhaps that is our best argument against coercion. But there are others, however, who find this skeptical approach to the defense of liberty self-negating. If there's so little we know and then a John Kenneth Galbraith comes forth and says "But I know it all," then oughtn't he be given the opportunity to make his way our way as opposed to we who admit that we know very little?

READ: You see there are very few people on earth who are aware of how little they know. It was Socrates who said "That man thinks he knows everything, whereas he knows nothing. I on the other hand, know nothing, but I know I know nothing." And it is not until a person empties himself of know-it-allness that he can possibly rise in wisdom and understanding and excellence. And in that respect I resemble Socrates.

REASON: Let me raise a more detailed point. Some advocates of the free society consider government an unnecessary evil and incompatible with the freedom philosophy. What would you respond to that?

READ: Let me first consider the idea that government is said to be a necessary evil. This saying appears to be without merit, for can anything be at once necessary and evil? True, all governments have had a history of evil doing, more or less. However it does not follow from this experience that their good is indistinguishable from their evil. Governments, assuming a proper limitation of their activities, are necessary and not evil. Their evil begins when they step out of bounds. The only necessity is that their evil actions be discontinued. Such an achievement is unlikely until the principles prescribing the boundary lines are searched for and found.

REASON: There are those, however, arguing that government is not a necessary but an *unnecessary* evil. They are mitigated anarchists who would not even admit that there's any need for the government, but that the marketplace would take care of the need governments supposedly fulfill.

"The advancement of the free market philosophy is a learning rather than a selling problem."

READ: Well, obviously I do not agree with that point. I wrote a book in 1954 entitled *Government, An Ideal Concept*. And in that I brought out the point that Man is at once a social and an individualistic being. I tried to identify those aspects of Man which are social—the balance being individualistic. That's my belief. Socialism is planned chaos and anarchy is unplanned chaos. So far as I am concerned I couldn't care for either.

REASON: At some point or another you endorsed the idea of a certain form of taxation that would be permissible under the system of limited government that you would favor. Could you elaborate on this for us?

READ: In my book in 1954, I said that the tax to support a principled government—a government limited to where it should be limited—that tax is appropriate. But when there's a tax for the unprincipled activities of the government—that's robbery. But there is a way to draw that line and I do it in the book.

REASON: You know this is a very touchy point with most libertarians, because they would say, I think, that the moment you allow any kind of

payment to be extracted by way of coercion the government is put outside of the realm of its proper function.

READ: Yes, I know. I hear that all the time. And you see—you use the word coercion. Really there are two types of physical force. One is defensive and the other is aggressive. And I can illustrate what I mean by the aggressive. Let's assume that I'm government and I stand here with a gun in front of your home and I keep away the marauders and the thieves. That is a defensive use of force. If on the other hand with that gun I go into your home and take your possessions and keep them for myself or give them to others, that is the aggressive use of force and I don't buy that at all. That's a clarifying point for me in my thinking.

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REASON: Suppose no one has invited you to that door to keep away the people who are threatening or aggressing upon it—but you still protect that house and then, once you have succeeded, you go in and start to collect for your services. Suppose the people living there say "I'm sorry, we didn't invite you here to work for us, so please go away." Would you say that they are acting justly or not?

READ: I would say not. And that's too long a point for me to develop in this interview but I said earlier that every person is at once a social as well as an individualistic being. You are not outside of society or anyone else.

REASON: I'd like to ask you about another person who is respected by many of our readers and whom you know—Ayn Rand. It's fair to state you disagree with her in at least one respect, and that is the issue of the primacy of human reason as a means by which to approach the problems of politics, ethics, and life in general. You appear to see an inherent mystery in reality.

READ: As a matter of fact, everything in life, from a blade of grass to the blink of an eye to a galaxy, is mystery. And I happen to think that there is something over Leonard Read's mind. I don't know what it is. I believe with Ralph Waldo Emerson that there is something—I don't know what it is, but there's something—over and beyond me. And all I

have to do is to know that it is, and it's all mystery. Sometimes I'm called a mystic or neomystic by reason of believing that there's something over and beyond my mind. But I do and I acknowledge it and I'm glad of it. The world would be in one hell of a mess if there weren't.

REASON: Apropos Ayn Rand—you were influential in bringing Ayn Rand's novel *Anthem* to publication in the United States. How did that come about?

READ: Bill Mullendore and I were at her home for dinner one night. Mullendore made the statement, along toward midnight, "Someday I'm going to write a book assuming a condition of 100 percent communism and then argue the case for freedom from that vantage point," and Miss Rand spoke up and said she had already written that book. And I said "Ayn, I thought I had read everything you had ever written, and I've never heard of it. What's the title?" She said "Anthem." "Where's it published?" "They wouldn't publish it in the United States—it's published in England." "May I see a copy?" She said, "I have only one copy and I will not release it to anyone." Well, anyway I pleaded with her and she loaned it to me. I said, "I'm flying to New York in the morning. I will return it tomorrow afternoon." And I read it on the plane. Then I gave it to my secretary and said, "Return this to Miss Rand," and just before quitting that night I asked "Did you return it?" and she said "Yes, but I took it to lunch with me and I read it. Isn't it too bad that other people cannot read that book!"

Well I mentioned before that I had this ad hoc outfit in Los Angeles, Pamphleteers, Inc., and under that imprint I published *Anthem* and wrote the foreword myself. It is a perfectly remarkable book. And I might add that Miss Rand is one of the most brilliant women I have ever met in my life.

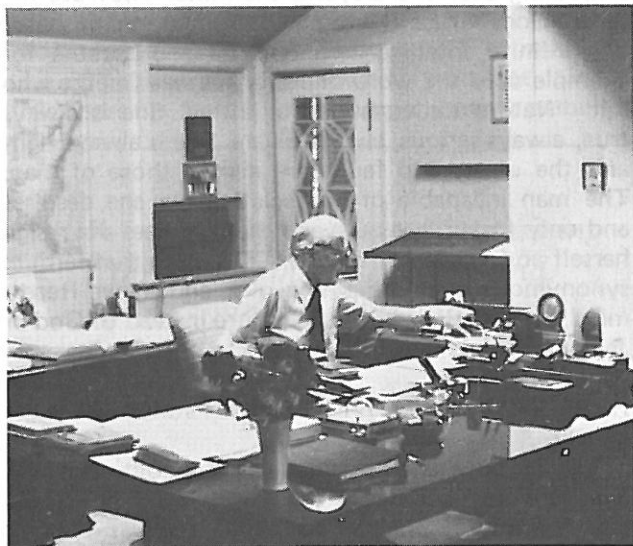
REASON: Let me ask you a question that I think is on the minds of a number of people. What do you think about the current state of affairs in American politics and culture? Are we on a disaster path?

READ: Based upon the historical record, it's evolution/devolution, evolution/devolution, on and on. It's a wave sequence sort of a thing and in my judgment we are in one of those. Now these devolutionary things—the things that are happening in the United States—are happening in every country on the face of this earth. It's a world-wide phenomenon. But in my judgment it has its purpose. I wrote in one of my books one time that everything seemingly bad has some good in it if you can find it. What can be good about this? What's good about it is that it's causing a lot of people like you and thousands of others of us to do some thinking that we have never done before. In other words, in order to emerge, to evolve, to gain in awareness, perception, consciousness, it's absolute-

ly necessary that we have obstacles to overcome. We emerge by stepping over and above the problems. Well, we have a very fine problem on our hands here but there are tens of thousands of people today who are waking up and who are using something above the shoulders that they would not have used had we been in a state of prosperity.

REASON: That is one account of the growth of philosophy in the later periods of ancient Greece. That paints a rather dismal picture for the prospects of a free society. It implies that if we do achieve the prosperous free society, intellectual lethargy must accompany it.

READ: Usually that's what happened, but here we have to have—and this is necessary—an "intellectual rising" above that. People have got to come to understand the meaning of prosperity. Now what is



the purpose of wealth? Is the purpose of wealth to get out of life? To vegetate, that sort of thing? No! It is to free the individual from that slavery which poverty imposes, that one may get ever, ever deeper into life pursuing his own uniqueness. That is the purpose of it. Now that is a very deep problem but as things go on in this universe more and more has to be expected of Man. Not less and less. Not vegetation.

REASON: You mentioned the evolution/devolution concept regarding your notion of history. There is a problem with that idea. It is that it confines Man to an *inevitable* sequence. He as an individual can do nothing. What is to prevent him from just throwing up his hands and saying, "Let it happen"?

READ: Yes. That's what many are doing, but that's not my philosophy. This is a challenge which can be intellectually met. Will it? I don't know, because I do not have a crystal ball and if I had one I wouldn't know how to read it nor does anybody else.

REASON: When I came into your office I noticed that you were autographing some copies of your newest book. How well do your own books sell and how well do the books of the Foundation in general sell?

READ: Well, we have about 115 volumes in what we call our Freedom Library—three of these, *Economics in One Lesson*, *The Mainspring of Human Progress* and *The Law*, have now sold well over one-half million volumes each. Now when it comes to my books they sell about as fast as Mises' books. My books will sell something between 5 and 12 thousand volumes—something like that. Not big sellers and they never will be big sellers. I don't expect them to be.

REASON: Do you advertise primarily through *The Freeman* or do you have independent advertising?

READ: We do announcements any time we bring out a book. All I do is devise a flyer and send it to the mailing list and if they want it they order it. That's all.

REASON: How is the Foundation itself doing financially these days? What are the plans for the future?

READ: Financially the Foundation is doing well—perhaps better than any other organization of our general faith. So far as our seminars are concerned, we're getting better at explaining the freedom philosophy and the participants are far more eager beaver—wanting to know—than they were a few years ago. It's fantastically encouraging.

REASON: There has been criticism of *The Freeman* at times—I don't mean any kind of hostile criticisms, but observations to the effect that *The Freeman* is a mixed journal. It mixes scholarly papers with anecdotal pieces. How do you evaluate this mixture?

READ: I think it's a pretty good idea to mix them up. There are people who read the little anecdotal things who will not read the scholarly ones and vice versa. And the main thing is this: I cannot insinuate one of my ideas into your consciousness—the only thing that I can do or *The Freeman* can do or any of us can do is to bring an idea to the brink of another's mind. And until that individual absorbs it into his own tissue, so to speak, nothing happens. In other words, what each person has to do is to start learning for himself and the main thing is that we can help each other. When I take a look at my own situation, if I acknowledged the help that I've been given by other persons over the centuries, past and present, it may account for everything I do.

REASON: You wouldn't want, however, to deny the enormous significance of the individual in integrating these ideas and making something out of them

however many people have contributed to the development of the ideas and the theories and the projects and plans? It's still an individual that has to put them into effect.

READ: Of course. That is right.

REASON: Let me ask some more questions about your substantive basic view. Do you have a theory of evil, just as you have a theory of good? What would you consider the fundamental wrong thing for people to do in their lives, that which gives rise to all the other humanly caused ills that we experience in life?

READ: I wrote a book one time entitled *Deeper Than You Think*, and stated that if you asked me "What is the cause of this inflation?" I could answer. Then if you asked what is the cause of that, I could tell you. And so forth. Then pretty soon you get to the question, what causes human beings to behave the way they do? And I do not know the answer to that. I do have my own way of identifying evil, those things I consider to be wrong. Let me put it this way. Perhaps the most important thing in my philosophy is what I refer to as integrity. Integrity is that which my

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highest conscience dictates as right. That may not in fact be right, but that is as close to righteousness as Read can get. Now that's morality and any deviation from that—for instance, for me to say to you in this interview something that I do not believe to be true in order to gain favor, that would be a lie—would be evil. And it's the basic evil.

REASON: Do you think that Christian ethics constitutes the best foundation of the whole system of free society?

READ: Well, if you ask me what are my foundations, or my moral foundations, it would be the Golden Rule and the Ten Commandments. You know this puts me on the side of the writers of the Declaration of Independence. They said that all Men are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights. That among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. By proclaiming the Creator as the endower of Men's rights, they proclaim the Creator, not government, as sovereign—denying government that ancient and medieval role.

REASON: Of course the idea of Creator is very complicated. There are a number of studies on the Founding Fathers concluding that they were mostly *deists*. Deism is the view that God may have initially created the universe, but has since then stood aside, not worrying about it any more, leaving it up to us to do the best we can with it. In that way, it is left to us to identify the principles of correct conduct. There are arguments to the effect that the concept "Creator" is in the Declaration because it avoids the problem of clearly committing oneself to any form of theism. The Creator could very well be just Nature itself, not some conscious being. In any case, the doctrine of human rights may not be tied as closely to theism as your answer indicates. But you yourself, however, prefer that way of arguing for the free society?

READ: Yes. A lot of people use different terms for something over and beyond the mind. They use the term "God." I use the terms "infinite consciousness" or "infinite intelligence." Spinoza and Goethe for example used the word "nature." It was Goethe who said "Nature understands no jesting. She is always true, always serious, always severe. She is always right and the errors and faults are always those of man. The man incapable of appreciating her she despises and only to apt, the pure and the true does she resign herself and reveal her secrets." I'm using that term as synonymous with something over and above Read's mind, as they did; they used nature instead of God or Jehovah, didn't they?

REASON: I understand. You've stated it quite clearly.

Let me now get to a couple of real political issues. You are familiar with the record of the Nixon administration. One of its highlights was Nixon's attempt to repair some of the problems that existed between Communist China and the United States. One of the consequences of that diplomatic feat of Richard Nixon's may be expansion or increase of trade between Red China and the United States. Do you believe that trade with Red China is something that can be regarded as a matter of exercising one's human rights in a free society? Some argue that it would be an act of treason.

READ: I've just written a piece on it. The true ambassadors of goodwill are men free to produce, free to exchange, free to travel. But things get all mixed up when the ambassadors are politicians. I don't like that. I would let you trade with anybody that you pleased.

REASON: The problem here is that some people would want to characterize trading with that government somewhat on the order of trading with a thief who's peddling stolen goods. And that puts the matter in a rather different perspective.

READ: Of course it does. And it's not easy to resolve, but if you wanted to trade with another government, go ahead and do it and take your chances.

REASON: You would not agree that the United States should insure you with taxpayers' money!

READ: Absolutely not!

REASON: You have been advocating the freedom philosophy for several decades now. How do you assess your contributions—your efforts to achieve liberty in our time?

READ: There is really no way to make such an assessment that has any meaning. I don't know. I just received a letter this morning from a friend in Australia who said, "Do you not get distraught because people do not let you know how much they're benefiting from what you and the Foundation do?" And my answer is, "I do not." The only way I would get distraught would be if I were not doing the best possible for me in realizing my own capabilities.

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REASON: You do consider yourself a successful person?

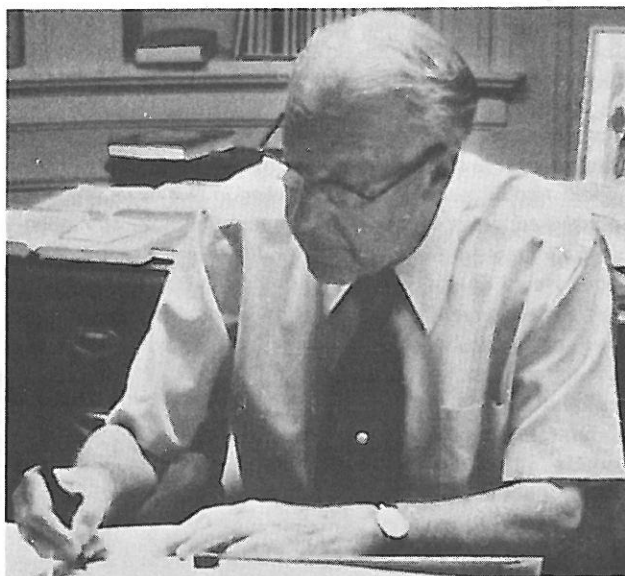
READ: Well it's according to how you want to measure success.

REASON: Measuring it by your own standards! How else am I going to ask the question right now? But you would say that your goals, your mission is being served with the best of your ability?

READ: I will say that I am working day and night to the best of my ability. I don't want to say more than that.

REASON: You know, you're a person in your late 70's and you are in excellent shape, very lucid and have a full day. To what do you attribute this enormous success, at least in that respect?

READ: Well, so far as the Foundation is concerned, I have a good number of people here who work with and not for me. We work together, which permits me



to do all these things, all this travelling, all this writing, everything else. And I don't find myself in want of time at all.

REASON: You don't have some secret formula that you would divulge on how to keep fit in old age?

READ: Not exactly. But I would suggest that you control yourself against fretting, worry, anger, all the forms of stress. That's the main thing in life—keep away from stress—because it kills you. Keep happy; have fun!

REASON: Do you have any opinions of efforts that are being made on other fronts to advance liberty?

READ: I stick to my own path as you know; it's possible that what we're doing here is not absolutely right, and so I'm in favor of everybody doing what they think is right, and from all of us, will come, I think, some approach to truth.

REASON: Maybe you would like to convey to our readers some final thoughts.

READ: Most people are today distressed with the disagreements among those of us who in a general way favor this free market, private ownership, limited government philosophy. I, however, am not distraught by this at all. You see, and I admit it, all of us are at sixes and sevens. No two of us have precisely the same ideas of what ought and ought not to be. Indeed yours and mine are in a constant flux. No one excepting a mummy ever stays put. My answer to these disagreements is simply this: dialogue. Free and open discussion. You airing your thoughts and I mine. This is a way to emerge in awareness, to gain enlightenment, to discover truth. Now and then a glimmer from you or perhaps from me. It is this freedom in discourse that assures ascendancy. □