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## **Libertarianism Is the Key to Our Future**

**by Jacob G. Hornberger**

Why do I remain convinced that the American people will return to their libertarian heritage, especially given the continued trend toward socialism and interventionism in Washington, D.C.? There are three reasons: freedom, morality, and pragmatism.

### **Freedom**

Almost everyone prizes the concept of freedom. Yet relatively few people in history have realized it. Throughout recorded history, most people have had to live their entire lives under tyrannical and oppressive governments.

The big problem that Americans face is embodied in the words of the great German thinker Johann Goethe: “None are more hopelessly enslaved than those who falsely believe they are free.” Americans honestly believe that, unlike most people throughout history, they are living lives of freedom. They are not aware that they are actually living lives of unreality and self-deception.

That’s not to say that Americans don’t value freedom. On the contrary, it is among their highest values. They sing songs praising it and often refer to past Americans who died for freedom. It’s just that when it comes to their own freedom, they are living what might be called a “life of the lie” — a life of deception — a life of delusion.

This deception regarding the nature of freedom was undoubtedly one of the greatest achievements of the Franklin Roosevelt administration in the 1930s. You’ll recall that Roosevelt revolutionized American life by making the concept of the welfare state and regulated society a permanent fixture in our nation. But rather than convincing the American people of the virtues of socialism, paternalism, and government control, as other regimes in the world were doing, Roosevelt convinced Americans that their new system was, in fact, designed to save freedom and free enterprise. Americans bought the argument and ever since have lived under an oppressive economic system that they honestly, but mistakenly, believe is freedom and free enterprise.

To appreciate the stark differences between the freedom that our ancestors celebrated and what Americans today falsely celebrate as freedom, consider the following features of life in the United States in, say, 1880:

No Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid, income taxation, welfare, occupational licensure, immigration controls, travel restrictions, passports, paper money, central bank, or drug laws and few economic regulations. People were free to engage in any economic enterprise, accumulate unlimited amounts of wealth, travel and trade wherever they wanted, and do whatever they desired with their own money.

That is what was once understood to be economic liberty. That is what it once meant to be an American. That is what it once meant to be free.

Today, Americans obviously live under a totally opposite set of political-economic principles. All of the above-mentioned programs that were absent from American life in 1880 have become part and parcel of American life today. For modern-day Americans, freedom is defined by the extent to which the federal government takes care of them and protects them from the vicissitudes of life.

What would happen if Americans were to break through and realize the truth? What would happen if they finally came to the realization that what happened during the 1930s was not simply a reform or a “saving” of America’s free-enterprise system but instead an open embrace of the socialist and paternalist philosophy and ideas that were sweeping the world?

My hunch is that if Americans were to finally confront the reality of what has happened to their country, they would choose the principles of economic liberty that are their heritage rather than the socialist principles of “freedom” that were later imported to their nation. But in order to make such a conscious choice, they first have to confront the reality of what has happened to their country in the name of “saving freedom and free enterprise.”

That’s why our task as libertarians remains an educational one. It is a task, of course, that involves showing people the morality and virtue of economic liberty. But it also involves the much more fundamental task of showing people the true essence of individual freedom. For once a person no longer falsely believes he is free, he is faced with a choice: Should I remain the way I am, even though I now know that I am not free, or should I take whatever steps are needed to make me free?

It is, of course, impossible to predict how each person will answer that question. But the reason that governments do their best to convince people to never ask the question, especially by convincing them to falsely believe they are already free, is that there always exists the possibility that people, upon discovering the truth, will devote their time and energy to winning their freedom before they pass from this life.

## **Morality**

Almost everyone places moral principles near or at the top of his scale of values. The problem we face is that most Americans honestly believe that the welfare state and regulated society are based on moral principles. This has been another grand achievement of socialists and interventionists that again reaches back to the Roosevelt administration. Having become convinced that the welfare state and controlled society reflect how good and moral they are, Americans have also become willing, albeit unwitting, accomplices in the destruction of their own freedom.

Here is the essence of the income-tax/welfare-state argument with respect to morality:

Your American ancestors believed in a system in which everyone kept his own money and decided what to do with it. That system of rugged individualism was bad. That system failed, partly because individuals cannot be trusted to handle their own resources or to help those in need. Here is how we saved America's free-enterprise system. Everyone was required to send a certain part of his income to the federal government. Democratically elected federal officials decided the percentage and each year everyone was required to send in "his share." Then federal officials disbursed the funds to the poor and needy. Along with the members of Congress, the IRS, and federal welfare agencies, the American people are considered good and moral as the welfare-state disbursements are made.

Here is the controlled-society argument with respect to morality:

Your American ancestors didn't believe in drug laws, which means that they favored the use of harmful substances. Many of them abused their freedom by ingesting alcohol, cocaine, marijuana, and other harmful drugs. To do such things to one's body is immoral. The federal government, consisting of democratically elected public officials, used the power of the government to stamp out such immorality. By refraining from doing something immoral, even if out of fear of state prosecution and punishment, the American people are now more moral as a result.

What would happen if Americans were to discover that the welfare state and controlled society actually violate principles of morality? What would happen if they came to the realization that it is morally wrong to take a person's money from him by force, even if the money is going to be spent for a worthwhile cause? What if people came to the realization that it is morally wrong for the state to punish a person for making bad or sinful choices that inflict no violence on another person? What if they realized that moral principles dictate that individual persons be free to make such decisions for themselves, even if the results are not to the liking of others in society?

My hunch is that if Americans were to come to grips with the real moral implications of the welfare state and regulated society, they would turn to economic liberty and libertarianism. But in order to do that, they must first realize that they must make a choice — a choice between the immorality of the welfare state and controlled economy, and the moral principles that

underlie the genuinely free society. As long as they continue to remain mired in the false reality that the welfare state and regulated society reflect people's moral goodness, they have no need to consider the libertarian alternative.

### **Pragmatism**

It would be virtually impossible to find any aspect of the socialistic welfare state and controlled society that works — that is, that achieves the declared ends of those who support such programs.

Consider some of the major crises that confront our country: Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid, the dollar, Iraq, terrorism, immigration, the drug war, and education.

Do you notice a common denominator in all these programs? The federal government! The federal government has made a mess out of all of these areas of life. (Of course, the disaster of public schooling is rooted in socialist education at the local level, but certainly federal officials have made the situation worse with their subsidies, interventions, and controls.)

These disastrous results are not surprising to libertarians. Why? Because we have long known that socialism cannot work. It is incapable of working, even when the planning and regulating is done by U.S. bureaucrats. Socialism is inherently defective, as the people of the Soviet Union finally realized. But the difference is that they, unlike Americans, understood that theirs was a socialist system. What Americans still do not realize is that no matter how hard they try, they will never make any of their socialist programs succeed. And the primary reason they don't understand that is that they think that their system is freedom and free enterprise, which they rightly understand do succeed.

Consider, for example, the drug war. No matter how much the government cracks down — mandatory minimum sentences, asset forfeiture, extraditions of foreign drug lords, violations of financial privacy, chemical spraying of drug crops, infringements of civil liberties — it will never succeed in ending drug use or drug abuse.

Why is this so? Because the participants in a free market (which becomes the "black market" when the activity is made illegal) will always figure out ways to circumvent the laws. Crack down on cocaine, and the free-market price of cocaine goes up. When the price goes up, that attracts new suppliers. New suppliers mean more cocaine will be available for sale.

Consider, as another example, the decades-long war on immigrants. No matter how many reforms have been enacted in the last several decades to stem the tide of illegal aliens into the country, such reforms have not succeeded. One of the most important of the reforms was the one that criminalized the hiring of illegal aliens, which supporters said would finally resolve the problem because there would no longer be jobs available to the immigrants. Now, 10 million illegal aliens later, some members of Congress are suggesting that enacting new criminal penalties

— this time on Christian church groups that assist illegal aliens — will finally stem the tide of illegal immigrants.

But immigration controls will never work. Why? Because they are nothing more than socialist central planning, a process that is inherently defective. Just as in the Soviet Union, government officials are trying to plan a vast labor market which involves millions of people, each of whom is making his own decisions on the basis of constantly changing market conditions.

I repeat: No matter what government officials do — no matter what new reforms are enacted — the drug war will fail and the war on immigrants will fail. The same holds true for Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid, public schooling, and all the other socialist and interventionist programs that afflict our society.

This point deserves constant emphasis and reemphasis. The reason is obvious: Once Americans finally come to the realization that no matter what is done with these programs, they're going to fail anyway, then why would they continue supporting calls for new reforms? Why continue engaging in an act of futility? What would be the point of continuing to waste so much time and energy when one knows in advance that the result is doomed?

So why do Americans continue to look for that ideal reform that will finally bring success to America's socialist programs? Because they don't recognize these programs as socialist! They think that the programs are "free-enterprise." And they think that the programs are moral because they're intended to help people.

That's why freedom, morality, and pragmatism are inexorably intertwined. Once Americans break through to the truth and realize the true socialist nature of their economic system — and its immoral premises — they will more easily understand why all these programs have failed and will continue to fail no matter what is done to reform or save them.

Once that breakthrough and realization take place, there is but one alternative for the American people to turn to: freedom and the free market — economic liberty. In a word, libertarianism.

Libertarianism, not socialism or interventionism, is the cornerstone of our nation's heritage of freedom. Libertarianism succeeds in producing rising standards of living, nurtures voluntary charity, and promotes harmonies among people. It is a philosophy grounded in the moral foundations of freedom. Libertarianism is the key to the future of our nation.

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