

Is Freedom Winning?



How is freedom faring in our world? Many libertarians think we're losing our freedom. Louis James of Free-Market.Net reported that he asked a group of libertarians "how many had any doubts that America had its collective feet firmly planted on the road to serfdom" and found few optimists.

That's understandable. Government spending is up. We face new regulations on hiring, firing, accounting, smoking, eating, and more. Businesses, activists, and politicians use legislation and litigation to steal the property of pharmaceutical firms, computer networks, and other creators. Republican leaders of Congress talk about using their new power to pass prescription drug subsidies and energy subsidies. We have been saddled with new restrictions on civil liberties since September 11, 2001, and now we stand on the verge of a preemptive war against Iraq.

A friend of freedom could get discouraged.

Nevertheless, let me try a different angle, a historical perspective. In 2002, as I prepared a book, *Toward Liberty: The Idea That Is Changing the World*, and the Cato Institute's report on its first quarter century, I found myself thinking a lot about the past 25 years.

Cast your mind back to 1977: Jimmy Carter. Tip O'Neill. Energy czars. Gas lines. Raging inflation. ABC-NBC-CBS. Mao Tse-tung. The Soviet Union. Apartheid.

That was a different world. Since then Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher have revived the ideas of free markets and limited government. The Soviet empire has fallen, and the ex-Soviet nations are struggling toward market economies and constitutional government. We've learned a bit about inflation and energy price controls. New media have arisen to challenge the Establishment media—to the point that the liberal Establishment media are now busily trying to convince their millions of readers and viewers that conservatives dominate the media. Hardly, but at least there's competition now.

As for China, just consider two recent stories in the *New York Times*. One reported a raging intellectual debate between a dominant group of "neoliberals" who "tend to echo Reagan and Thatcher" and believe in privatization, property rights, and limited government and a "New Left" who want more democracy and a social safety net and who cite Tocqueville as an influence. Isn't that an amazing debate to be having in China 25 years after Mao's death? And then there was a subsequent headline, during the Communist Party Congress: "In China, Capitalism Is Possibly the Future of Communism."

If we look at the long term—from a past that includes despotism, feudalism, absolutism, fascism, and communism to our

current mixed-economy democracy—I think we have to conclude that freedom is winning. People aren't completely stupid, and we've learned a lot in the past few hundred years.

When we look at a more recent comparison—contrasting 2002 with 1776 or 1910 or 1950 or whatever—the story is less clear. We suffer under a lot of regulations and restrictions that our ancestors didn't face. But in 1776 black Americans were held in chattel slavery, and married women had no legal existence except as agents of their husbands. In 1910 and even 1950, blacks still suffered under the legal bonds of Jim Crow—and we all faced confiscatory tax rates throughout the postwar period. Think back again to 1977; not only did we have 70 percent tax rates, we had strict price regulations on trucking and airlines . . . it was often illegal for a trucking company to take tomatoes to the city and furniture back to rural areas . . . we had a monopoly phone company and strict regulations on interest and investing . . . sodomy laws in most states . . . and at least briefly, generalized wage and price controls.

In 1776, 1950, or now, there's never been a golden age of liberty, and there never will be. People who value freedom will always have to defend it from those who claim the right to wield power over others. For us, right now, there are several battles to fight.

There's the battle to defend our entire society from assaults by a backward and repressive fundamentalism armed with weapons of mass destruction. Closer to home, there are battles against ideologues of both right and left and against pure subsidy seekers, who would use the massive power of the federal government to tax, regulate, and manipulate us into serving their goals.

As the abolitionist Wendell Phillips said, "Eternal vigilance is the price of liberty." And in today's world, that means more than a musket by the door. It means being an active citizen. Faced with threats to freedom, we can retreat into our private lives, or we can come out and

fight, on the battlefield of ideas and public debate. Every one of us can defend limited, constitutional government and free markets in our houses of worship, in our workplaces, when our members of Congress hold town meetings, in the letters column of the newspaper. In addition to engaged citizens, we also need political leaders, political strategists, scholars, policy analysts, communications experts, and more to fight the battle. And we need people—like John Hancock and Robert Morris and Haym Solomon, who funded the American Revolution—to fund *our* battles. I am glad that so many Americans regard the Cato Institute as their voice in Washington, staying on top of new threats to our liberties and working to advance proposals for more freedom and less government. That's our challenge for the year, and for the next 25 years.

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—David Boaz