



BY DAVID BOAZ

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EDITORIAL

The Soul of America

President Biden launched his reelection campaign by declaring, “We’re in a battle for the soul of America. The question we’re facing is whether in the years ahead, we have more freedom or less freedom. More rights or fewer.” Music to libertarian ears. But one might question whether either party today is offering Americans more freedom, or truly understands the soul of America. The Founders gave us a mission statement for the United States of America, an expression of its soul:

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed.

That mission statement created a legacy. The Pulitzer Prize-winning historian Bernard Bailyn elaborated on how early Americans made those ideas real:

Written constitutions; the separation of powers; bills of rights; limitations on executives, on legislatures, and courts; restrictions on the right to coerce and wage war—all express the profound distrust of power that lies at the ideological heart of the American Revolution and that has remained with us as a permanent legacy ever after.

How are our leaders living up to those principles today? The idea of restricting power has too often been replaced by faith that a leader’s every passing thought should be turned into law, by legislation if possible, by executive order or administrative regulation if necessary. Worse, growing tribalism leads to an attitude that the point of gaining office is to use state power to reward “us” and to harm “them.”

President Biden correctly calls his predecessor’s attempt to overturn the election an assault on democracy and the Constitution. Too few Republican officials affirm that Biden won the election and that it was shockingly wrong to try to pressure election officials to “find” more votes. However, the president’s embrace of freedom seems to extend only to a few issues. He would raise taxes on both individuals and corporations, reducing our freedom to spend the money we earn; borrow and borrow

(and borrow)—which crowds out private borrowing—and pile up debt, which is paid eventually with taxes or inflation. Government’s preferences are substituted for our own. Freedom to live as you want matters, too.

The costs of Biden’s regulations so far exceed those of Presidents Donald Trump and Barack Obama combined. Most of them restrict our freedom. Like his predecessor, Biden continues to impose costs on consumers through tariffs and other trade restrictions. His Federal Trade Commission seeks to break up America’s successful companies. Subsidies are handed to favored industries and firms. He would deny families the freedom to choose the best schools for their children.

Meanwhile, the two leading candidates for the Republican presidential nomination pound the table for freedom. Before his election loss, the former president’s great passions were to restrict international trade and immigration, and he threatened to send military troops into U.S. cities over the objections of local governments. Now he’s proposing military strikes in Mexico.

His chief Republican rival proclaims his support for free speech but has launched multiple legal assaults on the Walt Disney Co. after it issued a tepid criticism of a bill regulating what teachers could say about sexual orientation and gender identity. He barred Florida companies, including cruise ships, from setting their own vaccination policies. This is not your father’s idea of free enterprise. And all of this comes at a time when leading conservatives are writing things like “The right must be comfortable wielding the levers of state power,” and “using them to reward friends and punish enemies.”

Republican governors and legislatures are taking books out of schools—ranging from some that are actually problematic to biographies of Rosa Parks—and rushing to legislate restrictions on transgender people and “drag shows” without much careful consideration. It’s reminiscent of those who rushed in the early 2000s to ban same-sex marriage. The current mania is partly in response to similarly rushed federal mandates regarding transgender policy on local governments.

In all this haste to legislate bans, mandates, taxes, regulations, subsidies, boondoggles, and punishments, who’s looking out for the soul of America?