

To Own or Be Owned: That Is the Question

BY LAWRENCE W. REED



In coming months, and probably years, President Bush's "Ownership Society" proposals—in particular, his plans for personal accounts within Social Security, health savings accounts, and more school choice — will stimulate national discussion in directions politicians for decades have feared to tread. Whether you think the President's specifics have merit or not, this development should be seen as an opportunity to remind the American public of some critically important truths.

The fact is, "ownership" as a *general* concept is never at issue in any society. It is neither possible nor desirable to construct a society in which people or the material things they create are not "owned." Either you will "own" yourself or someone else will own you. As far as material things are concerned, somebody must own them too. Those "somebodies" will either be those who created them, received them as a gift, or traded freely for them, or they will be those who take them by force. There is no middle ground, no "third way" in which ownership is somehow avoided.

Indeed, ownership is both a virtue and a necessity. What is yours, you tend to husband. If it belongs to someone else, you have little incentive to care for it. If it belongs to "everyone"—the nebulous, collectivist approach—then you have every incentive to use and abuse it. That's why over thousands of years of history experience continually reinforces this essential axiom: the more the government owns and thereby controls, the less free and productive the people are.

Ownership is nothing less than the right to shape, use, and dispose. Even if you have legal title to something, you wouldn't think you really owned it if the gov-

ernment told you what you could do with it, how, and when; in that instance, the government would be the de facto owner. In a real sense, ownership is control and the actual owner of anything is the controller.

For thoroughly trashing the resources of any society, no more surefire prescription exists than to take them from those to whom they belong (the rightful owners) and give them to those who are convinced in the fantasyland of their own minds that they have a better idea of

what to do with them. Think "Soviet." Socialist regimes, which take from some and give to others at the point of a gun, have their cockamamie schemes for how to squander the loot, but they display an infantile ignorance of how to create wealth in the first place.

Much has been made in the past about alleged differences between fascism and communism. Sure, the Nazis invaded Stalinist Russia (after the two had made a deal to squash and divide Poland), but that was a dispute between thieves that proved the old adage that there's no honor among them. On the question of ownership, the difference was a cosmetic one that ultimately mattered little to the ordinary citizen.

Communists didn't let you own a factory, and if you did own one when they came to power you were shot. Fascists often refrained from nationalizing a factory, but if you as the alleged owner didn't do as you were told, you were shot. Under either system, real ownership was in the hands of the omnipotent State, regardless of what any scrap of legal title paper said.

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Lawrence Reed (Reed@mackinac.org) is president of the Mackinac Center for Public Policy (www.mackinac.org), a free-market research and educational organization in Midland, Michigan.

The myth of “common ownership” only muddies the issue. Public parks are thought of as held in common (“the people’s property”), but that really means that the government owns them, the taxpayers pay the bill, and the public gets to use them according to the rules established and enforced by the government. Some have argued that the post office is another example of common ownership. That would mean that theoretically, each American owns about one-three-hundred-millionth of it, but show up at the counter and try to redeem your share and you might be surprised how fast the response can be.

The debate over the President’s Ownership Society proposals should be framed in these stark terms: It’s either you or somebody else. Who should own your retirement savings—you or the government? Who should own your health-care dollars—you, the government, or some third-party payer you’d prefer to avoid? Who should decide where your child goes to school—you the parent or a handful of *other* parents different from you only by virtue of the fact that they work for the government?

Those questions should not be answered solely on utilitarian grounds. In a free society, Person A might choose a better school or make a better investment than Person B—a fact that can’t be known for certain in advance. But in any event, that does not mystically grant Person B the right to make Person A’s choices for him. If freedom means anything, it means the *right* to make your own choices even if you make what others regard as mistakes. When someone argues that we cannot allow

people more choices over their retirement, health care, or schools, we should demand they tell us by what right do they make these decisions for us?

Make no mistake about it: the more someone else controls you and the important decisions that govern your life, the more they own you.

Modest Proposals

In this light, President Bush’s initiatives actually appear downright modest. Even if passed, the government would still own a large majority share of each American’s compulsory Social Security dollars. Government and third-party payers would still dominate the health-

care market, and most parents who want to send their children to schools other than government schools wouldn’t get much of a break.

But the ferocity and the shallowness with which the ideological opposition in Congress has responded speak volumes about what their core values really are. To many, it’s more important that government be in control and you be dependent on it than that your retirement savings are secure, your health-care are needs

taken care of, or your children get a better education. They freely pile on new duties for government to perform even as it breaks previous promises and racks up trillions in debt. We are supposed to believe the utter fancy that life will be less risky if we trust to them and government’s handiwork instead of to ourselves. I suspect that some of these social engineers will not be satisfied until they own the rest of us lock, stock, and barrel.

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