

Not Losing Sight of the Best in the Pursuit of Liberty

BY RICHARD M. EBELING



The eighteenth-century French Enlightenment philosopher Voltaire warned that “the best is the enemy of the good.” He meant that in trying to pursue unattainable perfection, we may miss the opportunity to create something better than what we have. There is much wisdom in these words. But there is danger in its opposite: If we allow ourselves to be satisfied with what merely seems like something better (or less bad), we may lose sight of the ideal and miss any chance to attain it. This seems to be the problem with some who have lost hope in the cause of liberty in America.

For example, conservative political analyst David Frum, free-market columnist Bruce Bartlett, and magazine writers Ross Douthat and Reihan Salam recently contributed to a symposium on “The GOP and Limited Government: Do They Have a Future Together?” on the Cato Institute website. Their common conclusion was that there is no chance for greater freedom in America for the foreseeable future, especially economic liberty. Therefore, we should be satisfied with advocating policies that would limit the damage from further government growth rather than wasting time trying to achieve the free society.

Frum argues that the best chance for a limited-government agenda passed in the 1990s, when the conservatives in Congress failed to push through their “Contract with America.” “The state is growing again,” Frum despairs, “and it is pre-programmed to carry on growing. Health spending will rise, pension spending will rise, and taxes will rise.” He says that “It may be that the future of conservatism is to recognize that it belongs to the past.” At best American conservatism may “live on as a tendency within both [political] parties,” but having no power over either one.

Bartlett believes “the Republican Party has become deeply corrupt and appears to lack any leaders with the potential for pushing it back in a more conservative direction.” Furthermore, there are so many people now

receiving funding at the political trough, “it is unrealistic to think that spending for them can be reduced except marginally.” He thinks that the dream of limited government should be forgotten. Big government cannot and will not be reduced. Instead, “conservatives and libertarians need to think seriously about how best to finance the government spending that is in the pipeline.” Given that “the extreme difficulty of making even minuscule changes in the growth path of federal spending,” libertarians should organize themselves into an “interest group along the lines of the National Rifle Association” and lobby for ways to limit the fiscal and regulatory damage of an inescapably bigger and bigger government. Bartlett favors a national value-added tax to fund the coming fiscal madness.

Douthat and Salam concur that conservatives “need to accept that government will remain large in the short-run—for reasons of entitlement spending alone, while pursuing long-range strategies that will produce a more opportunity-friendly, less statist America.” What do they propose for the longer run? Tax credits for families with children, including bonuses for having more babies, mandated portable health insurance, and lower costs for school. They admit that “not all of these ideas involve less government, *per se*—but the small-government movement has always been less about the absolute size of the federal budget and more about the way government spending shapes society, for good or (more often) for ill.”

These gentlemen have decided that the future belongs to the interventionist welfare state. Friends of freedom, whether they consider themselves conservatives or libertarians, must accept this fact for years to come. Their role in America, therefore, will be rearguard skirmishes and policy-influencing damage control as they watch an ever-expanding government.

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I would like to suggest that this attitude will only make the achievement of freedom more difficult. What happens in the political arena today or tomorrow will not determine if freedom is restored in the future.

A former FEE staff member once observed that while politicians say they lead political trends, they in fact follow them. They wet their finger, raise it in the air to see which way the political wind is blowing, and then run in front of the parade and say, "Follow me."

The case for liberty will be won outside of politics and the current political trends. It will be won through a change in the climate of ideas. And it will be won precisely by arguing the principled case for freedom, regardless of the apparent opposing trends of the time.

The burden we face is precisely the continuing predominance of collectivist and statist ideas in America and around the world. We see it in the notion that government must plan for our retirement, care for us when we get ill, see to the education of our children, regulate our activities in the marketplace, and paternalistically surveil what we eat, smoke, read, or watch. And how can we hope to roll back the state when too many friends of freedom participate in public-policy debates in which neither they nor anyone else challenges the rationale for such government intervention?

Back in the 1930s Albert Jay Nock wrote an essay titled "Isaiah's Job." Called by God to preach righteousness to the Israelites, Isaiah became despondent when it seemed that no one was listening and turning away from his or her sinful ways. Isaiah asked God why he had been sent on such an impossible task, and wanted to be relieved of this thankless and seemingly futile effort. God replied that just because he did not know whose heart and mind he was touching did not mean it was without effect. God knew who was touched by Isaiah's message, and that was all that was necessary.

Nock's point was that we must look beyond what may appear to be the successes and failures of the pres-

ent in making the case for liberty. Indeed, we must not even worry about whether or not we are winning. Constantly looking over our shoulders to see if anyone is following too often results in our changing the message to fit what we think others will find palatable. That means our message can't be much different from what already appeals to many people—in other words, just another variation on the statist themes of our time.

Lost Confidence

To persuasively preach an end to dependency on government can surely seem as impossible as Isaiah's job. The authors quoted have lost confidence in the triumph of freedom. And by surrendering in this way, they make it that much easier for the current statist trend to continue.

Our authors have concluded that just as men seem unable to resist the temptation of sin, so they are too weak to kick the habit of government dependency. But just as men can and have come to salvation, so they can also decide that freedom and self-responsibility are worth reclaiming as well.

In addition to this, the fiscal burdens of the welfare state are threatening to become so great in the coming decades that our society will face a series of unavoidable political crossroads. How severe the crises will be and how the damage will be minimized will depend on the moral and social philosophies that are competing for acceptance.

When such crises arise and political choices are made, it will be crucial that the classical-liberal, free-market vision is present as a viable alternative. This will not happen unless that vision has been presented in a consistent and principled way and in stark contrast to its collectivist competitors. Precisely so the ideal of freedom will be understood and taken seriously when that time comes, its advocates must have the courage of their convictions in defending it today. 