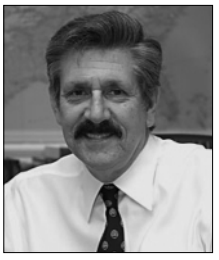

Freedom and the Role of Government

BY RICHARD M. EBELING

What is the role of government? This has been and remains the most fundamental question in all political discussions and debates. Its answer will determine the nature of the social order and how people will be expected and allowed to interact with one another—on the basis of either force or freedom.

The alternatives are really rather simple. Government may be narrowly limited to perform the essential task of protecting each individual's right to his life, liberty, and honestly acquired property. Or it may be used to try to modify, influence, or dictate the conduct of the citizenry.

In the first case, the government is assigned the duty of impartial umpire, enforcing the societal rules against assault, murder, robbery, and fraud. All human relationships are to be based on mutual consent and voluntary association and exchange.

In the second case, government is an active player in people's affairs, using its legitimized power of coercion to determine how the members of the society may live, work, and associate with each other. The government tries to assure certain outcomes or forms of behavior considered desirable by those who wield political authority.

We need to remember what government ultimately is all about. This was concisely explained by the Austrian economist Ludwig von Mises: "Government is in the last resort the employment of armed men, of policemen, of gendarmes, soldiers, prison guards, and hangmen. The essential feature of government is the enforcement of its decrees by beating, killing, and imprisoning. Those who are asking for more government interference are asking ultimately for more compulsion and less freedom."

Under a political regime of liberty, each individual gives purpose and moral compass to his own life. He is treated as independent and self-governing; as long as he does not violate the rights of others he is sovereign over his own affairs. He may choose and act wisely or absurdly, but it is his life to live as he pleases. If any of us—family members, friends, or just concerned fellow human beings—believe someone has chosen a path to perdition, we may try to persuade him to mend his ways. But we are expected to respect his freedom; we may not threaten or use force to make him change course.

Nor are we allowed to use political power to manipulate his options so that he does what we want him to do. Using taxation and regulation to induce conduct more to our liking is no less a political imposition than the sterner and more explicit police power.

The totalitarian systems of the twentieth century used the direct means of command and prohibition to get people to do what a Stalin, Hitler, Mussolini, or Mao wanted done. In the interventionist welfare state such brute means are normally shunned for the more indirect and subtle method of influencing people's behavior through manipulation of incentives. Suppose an individual stands at a crossroads and is told he may choose which way to go. But in front of one of the roads is a government toll booth, while in front of the other is a machine that dispenses a cash subsidy from the state. The choice is his, but the tradeoffs have been manipulated to influence his decision. In the 1950s the French coined a term for this type of political control: indicative planning. Through the use of fiscal and regulatory powers the government could get people to do what the politicians, bureaucrats, and various special-interest groups wanted, all the while maintaining the illusion that people were freely deciding where to invest or work or carry on their business.

Recently the well-known movie critic and editorialist Michael Medved devoted two newspaper columns to contrasting the liberal and conservative worldviews. Modern American liberals, he explained, are all about

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government solving problems of "victimhood" and alleviating the effects of claimed private-sector oppression of the poor and the weak. They wish to use the power of government to redistribute wealth from the rich to the supposedly needy and deserving. They want to use the regulatory power of the state to assure certain "ethically desirable" patterns of employment and to divert business from producing things without "real" social value.

Medved also emphasized that these policies often reward and reinforce the wrong types of behavior by not requiring people to bear the consequences of their actions, resulting in a weakening of the character and spirit of self-reliance among large segments of the population.

What, then, distinguishes a conservative from this contemporary American liberal? Medved tells us that "The essential instinct behind modern conservatism goes beyond a desire for small government. . . . Above all, conservatives feel impelled to make clear distinctions between right and wrong. In deciding where society should confer reward or punishment, conservatives consider whether behavior's been right or wrong." Furthermore, he considers free markets and the profit-and-loss system as good only because they "encourage wholesome, constructive choices."

The conservative, as understood by Medved, therefore, wishes to use the power of the state to assure wholesome conduct by the citizenry. If the liberal wants to tax inheritance to prevent some from having a financial advantage over others, the conservative wants to use the tax system to give a differential "reward" for the meritorious choice to leave more wealth for the next generation. The conservative wants to use the legislative and regulatory authority of government to induce the "right" social choices concerning the nature of families and the quality of communities.

Medved concludes his brief explanation by saying that the key to the conservative worldview is that "the choices we make in this life, for better or worse, carry consequences both practical and eternal."

Under Medved's understanding, conservatism is not about freedom, but is merely a competing system of social engineering. Like the modern liberals, he also believes it is the duty of government to influence and modify people's behavior. His only dispute with the liberals concerns the particular purposes for which the fiscal and regulatory tools of the state should be applied. He accepts the market economy only as long as it generates those outcomes he considers "wholesome" and "constructive." He presumably is willing to regulate the market if its outcomes are not to his liking.

Liberty the Highest Political Good

The great nineteenth-century historian and Christian classical liberal Lord Acton once said, "By liberty I mean the assurance that every man shall be protected in doing what he believes his duty against the influence of authority and custom, and opinion." For this reason, he declared that the securing of liberty "is the highest political good."

How can men be free to follow their conscience if they are not free from political control?

A conservative like Medved may reply that not all men are strong enough to do what conscience and duty require of them. But moral conduct is not fostered when the political dice are rigged to assure certain outcomes. Indeed, government weakens the development of character when it manipulates the tradeoffs.

Furthermore, once the state is given the responsibility to see that we do the "right thing," we have no certainty that those empowered to implement the necessary policies will share our values and beliefs. We may be setting up the institutional mechanisms for the government to undermine the very ideals we hold most dear.

Finally, the very notion of a free society is threatened by viewing people as objects to be manipulated rather than as unique individuals, whose very individuality as special creatures of God and nature should be treated with dignity and respect: as free men and not as bondsmen to be used and abused by an earthly Lord, whether that Lord is labeled "liberal" or "conservative."