

# Why Be Libertarian?

by [Murray N. Rothbard](#)

Why be libertarian, anyway? By this we mean, what's the point of the whole thing? Why engage in a deep and lifelong commitment to the principle and the goal of individual liberty? For such a commitment, in our largely unfree world, means inevitably a radical disagreement with, and alienation from, the *status quo*, an alienation which equally inevitably imposes many sacrifices in money and prestige. When life is short and the moment of victory far in the future, why go through all this?

Incredibly, we have found among the increasing number of libertarians in this country many people who come to a libertarian commitment from one or

another extremely narrow and personal point of view. Many are irresistibly attracted to liberty as an intellectual system or as an aesthetic goal, but liberty remains for them a purely intellectual parlor game, totally divorced from what they consider the "real" activities of their daily lives. Others are motivated to remain libertarians solely from their anticipation of their own personal financial profit. Realizing that a free market would provide far greater opportunities for able, independent men to reap entrepreneurial profits, they become and remain libertarians solely to find larger opportunities for business profit. While it is true that opportunities for profit will be far greater and more widespread in a free market and a free society, placing one's *primary* emphasis on this motivation for being a libertarian can only be considered grotesque. For in the often tortuous, difficult and grueling path that must be trod before liberty can be achieved, the libertarian's opportunities for personal profit will far more often be negative than abundant.

The consequence of the narrow and myopic vision of both the gamester and the would-be profit maker is that neither group has the slightest interest in the work of building a libertarian movement. And yet it is only through building such a movement that liberty may ultimately be achieved. Ideas, and especially radical ideas, do not advance in the world in and by themselves, as it were in a vacuum; they can only be advanced by *people* and, therefore, the development and advancement of such people — and therefore of a "movement" — becomes a prime task for the libertarian who is really serious about advancing his goals.

Turning from these men of narrow vision, we must also see that utilitarianism — the common ground of free-market economists — is unsatisfactory for developing a flourishing libertarian movement. While it is true and valuable to know that a free market would bring far greater abundance and a

healthier economy to everyone, rich and poor alike, a critical problem is whether this knowledge is enough to bring many people to a lifelong dedication to liberty.

In short, how many people will man the barricades and endure the many sacrifices that a consistent devotion to liberty entails, merely so that umpteen percent more people will have better bathtubs? Will they not rather set up for an easy life and forget the umpteen percent bathtubs? Ultimately, then, utilitarian economics, while indispensable in the developed structure of libertarian thought and action, is almost as unsatisfactory a basic ground work for the movement as those opportunists who simply seek a short-range profit.

It is our view that a flourishing libertarian movement, a lifelong dedication to liberty can only be grounded on a passion for justice. Here must be the mainspring of our drive, the armor that will sustain us in all the storms ahead, not the search for a quick buck, the playing of intellectual games or the cool calculation of general economic gains. And, to have a passion for justice, one must have a *theory* of what justice and injustice are — in short, a set of ethical principles of justice and injustice, which cannot be provided by utilitarian economics.

It is because we see the world reeking with injustices piled one on another to the very heavens that we are impelled to do all that we can to seek a world in which these and other injustices will be eradicated. Other traditional radical goals — such as the "abolition of poverty" — are, in contrast to this one, truly utopian, for man, simply by exerting his will, cannot abolish poverty. Poverty can only be abolished through the operation of certain economic factors — notably the investment of savings in capital — which can only operate by transforming nature over a long period of time. In short, man's will is here severely limited by the workings of — to use an old-fashioned but still valid term — natural law. But *injustices* are deeds that are inflicted by one set of men on another; they are precisely the actions of men, and, hence, they and their elimination are subject to man's instantaneous will.

Let us take an example: England's centuries-long occupation and brutal oppression of the Irish people. Now if, in 1900, we had looked at the state of Ireland, and we had considered the poverty of the Irish people, we would have had to say: poverty could be improved by the English getting out and removing their land monopolies, but the ultimate elimination of poverty in Ireland, under the best of conditions, would take time and be subject to the workings of economic law. But the goal of ending English oppression — that could have been done by the instantaneous action of men's will: by the English simply deciding to pull out of the country.

The fact that of course such decisions do not take place instantaneously is not the point; the point is that the very failure is an injustice that has been decided upon and imposed by the perpetrators of injustice — in this case, the English government. In the field of justice, man's will is all; men can move mountains, if only men so decide. A passion for instantaneous justice — in short, a radical passion — is therefore not utopian, as would be a desire for the instant elimination of poverty or the instant transformation of everyone into a concert pianist. For instant justice *could* be achieved if enough people so willed.

A true passion for justice, then, must be radical — in short, it must at least wish to attain its goals radically and instantaneously. Leonard E. Read, founding president of the Foundation for Economic Education, expressed this radical spirit very aptly when he wrote a pamphlet *I'd Push the Button*. The problem was what to do about the network of price and wage controls then being imposed on the economy by the Office of Price Administration. Most economic liberals were timidly or "realistically" advocating one or another form of gradual or staggered decontrols; at that point, Mr. Read took an

unequivocal and radical stand on principle: "if there were a button on this rostrum," he began his address, "the pressing of which would release all wage and price controls instantaneously, I would put my finger on it and push!"[\[1\]](#)

The true test, then, of the radical spirit, is the button-pushing test: if we could push the button for instantaneous abolition of unjust invasions of liberty, would we do it? If we would not do it, we could scarcely call ourselves libertarians, and most of us would only do it if primarily guided by a passion for justice.

The genuine libertarian, then, is, in all senses of the word, an "abolitionist"; he would, if he could, abolish instantaneously all invasions of liberty, whether it be, in the original coining of the term, slavery, or whether it be the manifold other instances of State oppression. He would, in the words of another libertarian in a similar connection, "blister my thumb pushing that button!"

The libertarian must perforce be a "button pusher" and an "abolitionist." Powered by justice, he cannot be moved by amoral utilitarian pleas that justice not come about until the criminals are "compensated." Thus, when in the early 19th century, the great abolitionist movement arose, voices of moderation promptly appeared counseling that it would only be fair to abolish slavery if the slave masters were financially compensated for their loss. In short, after centuries of oppression and exploitation, the slave masters were supposed to be further rewarded by a handsome sum mulcted by force from the mass of innocent taxpayers! The most apt comment on this proposal was made by the English philosophical radical Benjamin Pearson, who remarked that "he had thought it was the slaves who should have been compensated"; clearly, such compensation could only justly have come from the slaveholders themselves.[\[2\]](#)

Antilibertarians, and antiradicals generally, characteristically make the point that such "abolitionism" is "unrealistic;" by making such a charge they are hopelessly confusing the desired goal with a strategic estimate of the probable outcome.

In framing principle, it is of the utmost importance not to mix in strategic estimates with the forging of desired goals. First, goals must be formulated, which, in this case, would be the instant abolition of slavery or whatever other statist oppression we are considering. And we must first frame these goals without considering the probability of attaining them. The libertarian goals are "realistic" in the sense that they *could* be achieved if enough people agreed on their desirability, and that, if achieved, they would bring about a far better world. The "realism" of the goal can only be challenged by a critique of the goal *itself*, not in the problem of how to attain it. Then, after we have decided on the goal, we face the entirely separate strategic question of how to attain that goal as rapidly as possible, how to build a movement to attain it, etc.

Thus, William Lloyd Garrison was not being "unrealistic" when, in the 1830s, he raised the glorious standard of immediate emancipation of the slaves. His goal was the proper one, and his strategic realism came in the fact that he did not expect his goal to be quickly reached. Or, as Garrison himself distinguished:

Urge immediate abolition as earnestly as we may, it will, alas! be gradual abolition in the end. We have never said that slavery would be overthrown by a single blow; that it ought to be, we shall always contend.[\[3\]](#)

Actually, in the realm of the strategic, raising the banner of pure and radical principle is generally the fastest way of arriving at radical goals. For if the pure goal is never brought to the fore, there will never be any momentum developed for driving toward it. Slavery would never have been abolished at all if the abolitionists had not raised the hue and cry

thirty years earlier; and, as things came to pass, the abolition was at virtually a single blow rather than gradual or compensated.<sup>[4]</sup>

But above and beyond the requirements of strategy lie the commands of justice. In his famous editorial that launched *The Liberator* at the beginning of 1831, William Lloyd Garrison repented his previous adoption of the doctrine of gradual abolition:

I seize this opportunity to make a full and unequivocal recantation, and thus publicly to ask pardon of my God, of my country, and of my brethren, the poor slaves, for having uttered a sentiment so full of timidity, injustice and absurdity.

Upon being reproached for the habitual severity and heat of his language, Garrison retorted: "I have need to be all on fire, for I have mountains of ice about me to melt." It is this spirit that must mark the man truly dedicated to the cause of liberty.

<sup>[5]</sup>

#### *Notes*

<sup>[1]</sup> Leonard E. Read, *I'd Push the Button* (New York: Joseph D. McGuire, 1946), p. 3.

<sup>[2]</sup> William D. Grampp, *The Manchester School of Economics* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1960), p. 59.

<sup>[3]</sup> Quoted in William H. and Jane H. Pease, eds., *The Antislavery Argument* (Indianapolis: Robbs-Merrill, 1965), p. xxxv.

<sup>[4]</sup> At the conclusion of a brilliant philosophical critique of the charge of "unrealism" and its confusion of the good and the currently probable, Professor Philbrook declares:

Only one type of serious defense of a policy is open to an economist or anyone else: he must maintain that the policy is good. True 'realism' is the same thing men have always meant by wisdom: to decide the immediate in the light of the ultimate.

Clarence Philbrook, "'Realism' in Policy Espousal," *American Economic Review* (December, 1953): 859.

[5] For the quotes from Garrison, see Louis Ruchames, ed., *The Abolitionists* (New York: Capricorn Books, 1964), p. 31, and Fawn M. Brodie, "Who Defends the Abolitionist?" in Martin Duberman, ed., *The Antislavery Vanguard* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1965), p. 67. The Duberman work is a storehouse of valuable material, including refutations of the common effort by those committed to the status quo to engage in psychological smearing of radicals in general and abolitionists in particular. See especially Martin Duberman, "The Northern Response to Slavery," in *ibid.*, pp. 406–13.