Freer Is Safer

Written by John Semmens for The Voluntaryist, *February 1990.*

One of the most common delusions of our age is that government is enforcing regulations that will actually help improve safety. In the wave of deregulation that hit the economy in the last decade, many observers have found comfort in the knowledge that safety was not one of the components in the loosening of government controls. Oversight of safety was routinely retained as a responsibility of the public sector. Why anyone would place such confidence in government for the promotion of safety has always been a mystery to me. Granted, the protection of the public's safety has historically been a primal justification for the existence of government. But why should we expect government to be better at this job than it has been at the multitude of other tasks it habitually bungles? Let's face it, bureaucracy and quality workmanship are far from synonymous.

The only logical explanation for the great trust in public sector regulation of safety must be that it is an unexamined article of faith. Examining this faith is the major purpose of Professor Aaron Wildavsky's recently published book: *Searching for Safety* (Mew Brunswick: Transaction Books, 1988). The concept of outlawing hazards via legislative or administrative means is premised on the belief that we know what is safe and what is not. What if we don't know?

The idea that we may not know what is safe may strike many people as ludicrous. Surely, we can identify hazards like motor vehicle collisions, toxic chemicals, dangerous workplaces, and the like. However, identifying hazards is only part of the answer. If we are to deal with them, it is even more critical that we know whether they can be prevented and at what cost. For example, we could prevent traffic victims by prohibiting motion. Obviously, imposing total immobility would be too costly a remedy. At what point between complete immobility and runaway breakneck speed do we attain an optimal balance between safety and utility?

The very real question of costs cannot be dodged by the all-too-common cliche "that as long as one life is saved, it's worth it." The costs incurred by a specific safety measure consume resources that could have been used for other, perhaps more cost-effective, safety-enhancing measures. One effective means for improving safety is to promote economic growth. Greater material wealth is a direct path to better health. If wealthier is healthier, then the diversion of scarce resources to relatively inefficient attempts at imposing safety will actually end up costing rather than saving lives.

The contemporary political environment has fostered a pathological obsession with risk aversion. The rules aimed at "erring on the side of safety" are impeding the technological

and economic progress that have been the key to increasing human longevity. Fear of the unknown results in cumbersome restraints on research and experimentation. These restraints endanger the very public health and safety they purport to protect.

Since our present condition is not perfectly safe, it obviously could be improved upon. Daring to make improvements entails the willful assumption of some degree of risk. Exploring the unknown, whether it be in pursuit of better drugs, new modes of transport, or whatever, is a necessary step if we are to advance the frontiers of knowledge. Progress really does impel us to venture where no man has gone before. In this sense, the adage “nothing ventured, nothing gained” succinctly states the case for experimentation.

Venturing, experimenting, and risking are all activities ill-suited to the public sector. As the role of the public sector expands, there is apt to be less “venturing” and more “controlling.” The gains that could be made through progress will be retarded or foregone entirely. Human beings will be less safe than they otherwise could have been.

Not surprisingly, it turns out, once again, that the free market appears most conducive to human health and well-being. The decentralized decision-making characteristic of private enterprise means varied ventures will embark upon divergent paths. Many of these ventures, of course, will fail. Others will learn from these mistakes. Knowledge, the foundation of progress, will be produced. By the increments of many trials, the errors will be sorted out from the successes. Thus, the diversification inherent in the market approach to problem-solving has the effect of reducing the aggregate risk to society.

In the long-run, results weigh heavily in favor of the marketplace. Open, market-oriented environments produce longer-lived and healthier individuals. The search for safety brings us back to the enduring truth that freedom works.