

How Can We Do It?

Guest post by Robert LeFevre. Originally published in The Voluntaryist, October 1988.

Since I have repeatedly opposed the belief that one can advance the cause of liberty by political action, I have been asked on several occasions for an outline of the practical steps to be taken outside the political arena. How do we move from where we are to where we would like to be if we don't rely on politics?

My recommendation is based on my analysis of the nature of man. If man is a living being endowed with the ability to make decisions and to act on them, then the method employed to improve the human situation must take that fact into account. My analysis says that man is a self-controlling being.

How are people controlled? Each person controls himself. Each controls his own mind and his own body. Liberty is the natural ability of each individual to act on his own volition.

Can a person be controlled by some other method? Actually, no. All men are subject to persuasion, argument, pleading, influence, and so on. But no one must accede to the wishes of another. Even if a person is told to do a certain thing or die, reality teaches us that the person can still refuse. Under certain conditions, an individual may prefer to die rather than obey. Indeed, the primary cause of the violence that men exhibit toward each other is the direct result of their lack of ability to control each other. If one person could control the other, there would be little reason to interfere by physical violence.

If we seek a free society, or freedom, we must seek to establish a human situation in which the natural power of the individual to control himself will not be interfered with by physical violence. In short, we seek a condition in which all men will experience liberty.

The reason that people resort to force, or the threat of force, in dealing with each other is that the other party does not do what the first party wishes him to do. Force is threatened or used as a motivational, not a control factor.

When I have tried to persuade another, by all reasonable avenues open to me, and I am still met with refusal, I have only two possible avenues open. I can cease my efforts. Or I can become unreasonable. I can put reason aside and resort to force or the threat of force.

Reduced to simplicity, there are two motivational factors and only two. Remember, you control yourself. But to get you to control yourself in a way that pleases me, requires that I (1) offer you a gain if you comply—the carrot; or (2) offer to injure you if you don't comply—the stick.

All political systems rely on the stick. Do as you're told, or suffer. Only the market place offers gain (the carrot) as the motivational factor. A society in which each member experiences liberty will require the abandonment of the stick method and total reliance upon the carrot method.

Why is this necessarily true? Because the victim who experiences the stick wielded by another loses some of his freedom. Additionally, the party wielding the stick has been diverted from his principal objectives and is wasting time and energy on punitive matters. Thus, although he is still acting volitionally, the stick wielder has injured himself by choosing a secondary rather than a primary course of action.

What if the carrot method doesn't work? The only alternative within the context of freedom is to leave the individual alone to his own pursuits.

With this in mind, how do we move toward greater freedom in our society? Only by influence and persuasion, entailing the use of reason. The moment we become frustrated and begin to rely on force or the threat to use force (implicit in political processes), we have abandoned our objective and to some degree are reducing the amount of freedom.

The very first requirement, then, if we sincerely wish to achieve a greater measure of freedom, is intellectual. We must not only establish the goal but we must understand the nature of the goal. And we must be correct, in the sense that our definitions correspond to reality; either a reality that exists or a reality that can be brought into existence.

So far as I can determine, many libertarians have not as yet taken this first step. While it is true that most of those who speak up for liberty are intellectually involved, many of them are cringing before the onslaught of the anti-intellectuals who carp at virtually all intellectual activities.

The anti-intellectuals criticize the libertarian as a person who spends a great deal of time discussing ideas; in debating and probing the subject. Those who are uncomfortable in this area constantly tell me, "You've got to come up with a program of action or we won't have any libertarians left." "We want to DO something." "Don't give us all these theories, tell us what to do."

Another complaint is that "libertarians are completely impractical. They accept a principle or two and lose touch with the real world. They've got to get out of their ivory towers and come to grips with reality." "We need action!"

So libertarians are prone to get involved in politics, or they shoot off on scores of tangents of greater or lesser merit, with few holding the main thrust of freedom in the center of their objectives. Or as another alternative, they isolate themselves in disgust.

Thus, I find many fine people whose major concern is opposing the IRS. Or I find those whose principal concern is obtaining the legalization of drugs; or special laws respecting the status of women; or justice for the American Indian. Some become primarily concerned with repeal of income tax. Some seek to champion the concept of atheism. Some wish to promote certain psychological theories. The bulk of those calling themselves libertarian are pursuing their own individual ends, each more or less worthy in itself. But who speaks up for liberty as a primary goal? Who puts liberty at the top of his scale of values?

To move from a controlled society, taxed, regimented and stultifying, into a great new world of human liberty requires a revolution. But the revolution is one of thought, not of guns and bombs. What is required is for people to think differently than they presently do in respect to human relationships.

John Adams, after a lifetime of service first to the Colonial and then to the early Constitutional cause, had what to me is a remarkable insight that might apply today. In a letter to Hezekiah Niles dated February 13, 1818, and commenting on the American rebellion against Britain, Adams wrote: "The (American) Revolution was effected before the war commenced. The Revolution was in the hearts and minds of the people... This radical change in the principles, opinions, sentiments, and affection of the people was the real revolution..."

It took Adams a lifetime to realize that the importance of the decades through which he had lived was not the number of battles, the casualties, the war itself, but rather the change that had come in the way people thought; in their affections, opinions and sentiments.

They had moved from believing in the divine right of kings to a position in which they believed in the equal rights of man. Unfortunately, this great intellectual attainment was quickly lost in a new wave of dependence upon a centralized state—not a king, but an all-powerful state, nonetheless.

The libertarian revolution, as I see it, must achieve that same objective. We must have a change in the sentiments, opinions, and affections of the people themselves. How is that brought about? Clearly, the task is one that involves education.

Once a significant number of persons become convinced that we are dealing with an intellectual revolution rather than a political or military one, the practical steps to be taken reveal themselves.

When the individual sees through this problem clearly, he himself takes action. He does so by hitching his activities to that blazing comet of freedom speeding across our skies. How does he do this? He studies, learns, and communicates. And if his studies and his learning are incomplete (as must be for all of us), he begins the process of communicating what he

does know.

The more you try to explain ideas to others, the more the others will challenge and correct you. A teacher is no more than an active student.

To whom does he communicate? It really doesn't matter. The whole world is his artichoke. Logical starting places are with his own children, spouse, and friends who evince an interest. The job is not to persuade others to his opinion. The job is to encourage the others to formulate their own opinions in harmony with the reality of human liberty. The person who convinces himself remains convinced. The person who is persuaded by another can be re-persuaded later on. It is better to work a year or two with a single person until that person convinces himself than to labor in an effort to sway thousands.

What are the tools that will be most useful? They are the tools of education: the books, the films, the blackboards and chalk, the classroom—the log shared between someone eager to learn and someone eager to let him learn.

The school and the church can provide the proper climate and tools. To be effective, however, both school and church ought to be outside the conventional groves of academy or ordination. There is such a vested interest in most established institutions of learning and communication that the most skilled communicators will be more concerned with defending and enhancing their credentials or personal reputations than blazing a revolutionary trail.

Years ago, I accepted as a personal motto: “The man who knows what freedom means will find a way to be free. ” In short, I cannot “organize” a free society. Freedom emerges as the natural result of men working together in liberty when we stop “organizing” a free society.

Within the existing society, what we organize are specific units of production and distribution. We learn to support ourselves, pay our own bills, and champion the cause of liberty by consistent advocacy. As others glimpse the merit, they, one by one, join the effort. They do not have to join each other. They enlist in the concept.

From this procedure there can be no backlash. More and more persons, self-motivated and self-controlled, simply stop engaging in the existing social devices which impose on others. They break their ties with the existing political structures; not by violence, not by trying to obtain majorities or by using force, but by understanding and then thinking differently about the whole area of human relationship.

I know of no other practical method for moving from where we are to where at least some of us can see new hope and light.