

# Button Pushing or Abdication: Which?

*Guest post by Carl Watner. Originally published in The Voluntaryist, August 1985. For an earlier article on this topic, with a different perspective, at Everything-Voluntary.com, see this post.*

In Detroit on April 29, 1946, Leonard Read gave a speech to the Midwestern Conference of the Controllers Institute of America. The address, which was titled “I’d Push the Button,” opened on the following note:

*If there were a button on this rostrum, the pressing of which would release all wage and price controls [which were still in effect in the post-World War II period] instantaneously. I would put my finger on it and push!*

Read’s position, of course, was that the free market and wage and price controls were inimical to one another; that if the government price controls were wrong on principle, they should be abolished immediately. If there were such a button that could do away with them immediately, Read would not hesitate to push it because this would be one essential element in freeing the market.

Bob LeFevre once considered an analogous situation in an editorial he wrote for the Colorado Springs Gazette Telegraph. Appearing on July 9, 1959, in his “Not Against Government,” LeFevre urged his readers to suppose that they had a button before them. The button was to be wired in such a manner that when it was pushed it would do away with all vestiges of government:

*And let us suppose... that all persons who are thus occupied [in government] have promised faithfully that... they will quit their offices; that all government would cease as of that instant; and that in no way, shape or form would these individuals seek to establish another government.*

Supposing he was in control of the button, LeFevre asked himself: Would he push it? His answer was an unequivocal, “No.”

The balance of this paper is to explain LeFevre’s reasons for refusing to “push the button”

and to demonstrate how the voluntaryist position against electoral involvement and politics in general parallels LeFevre's thinking.

Essentially, LeFevre realized that all the button pushing in the world would not accomplish anything long-lasting if it were not accompanied by a concomitant change in public opinion. After all, it is public opinion and sentiment which endorses and supports any institution, such as government. If the government did not have the support of the majority of the people over which it exercised wage and price controls, it would be doubtful if the government could enforce its edicts. William Godwin, nearly two centuries ago, noted that "all government is founded on opinion. Men at present live under any particular form, because they conceive their interest to do so. ...Make men wise and by that very operation you make them free. Civil liberty follows as a consequence of this; no usurped power can stand against the artillery of opinion." (*Neither Bullets Nor Ballots*, p. 33)

Furthermore, LeFevre observed that it was inconsistent to argue for freedom by forcing men to be free. Although he did not address the question from the point of view of the proper means to be used, this was actually what he was driving at. Forcing men to be free is an improper way to achieve their freedom; improper in the sense that it is inconsistent with the end to be achieved and improper in the sense that it involves compelling people to do things against their wishes. As LeFevre put it, "We do not believe that persons who have been forced to accept freedom can either understand it or respond with the requisite responsibility so that freedom can be meaningful."

Button pushing would probably result in chaos because most people would still be looking towards government to solve their problems. "To force them to get along without this instrument of coercion would probably simply inspire them to set up other instruments of coercion. This would not be freedom. It would result in a horrible catastrophe." This illustrates the difference between voluntary abandonment of government (a natural process based on individual action) and abolition (i.e., button pushing) which can only be an artificial or compulsory procedure.

Not only did LeFevre not condone button pushing, but he claimed that he would abdicate if somehow he found himself in a position of total power: Any person who found himself in such a position "and who believed in freedom would have to abdicate." In an editorial of April 7, 1961, titled "A Substitute for Government," LeFevre went on record as advocating no substitute for government except the market place. Not political action for the purpose of elections, but rather education was his constant theme. What he claimed was entailed was "the long and painful re-education of the American people," such that public opinion would effect a shift away from socialism and statism. LeFevre was quick to admit that education was a long process, but what, he asked, was quicker?

Leonard Read was exposed to similar thinking long before Bob LeFevre ever became an

editorial writer for *The Gazette Telegraph*. In a story that he related in 1971, Read recounted his initial meeting with Ludwig von Mises. It was sometime in the early 1940's and occurred in the evening after a luncheon meeting during which von Mises addressed the Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce. "That evening he [Mises] dined at my home with renowned economists, Dr. Benjamin Anderson and Professor Thomas Nixon Carver, and several businessmen such as W.C. Mullendore. The final question was posed at midnight: 'Professor Mises, I agree with you that we are headed for troublous times. Now let us suppose you were the dictator of these United States. What would you do?' Quick as a flash came the reply, 'I would abdicate!'"

Since LeFevre and voluntaryists hold that aggression is wrong they realize it is a wrong means which will never lead towards individual freedom. We cannot use the weapons of tyranny; for freedom and reason are our only tools. One should never have to labor towards compelling others to accept freedom. One need only exert self-control, so as to not interfere with the freedom of others. "Freedom for all is the product of self-control."

So given the choice, what would you do: Push the button or Abdicate?