

Chapter 1 – Persuasion versus Force

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Persuasion versus Force

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Sometimes a single book or even a short cogent essay can change an individual's entire outlook on life. For Christians, it is the *New Testament*. For radical socialists, Karl Marx' and Friedrich Engels' *The Communist Manifesto* is revolutionary. For libertarians, Ayn Rand's *Atlas Shrugged* is pivotal. For economists, Ludwig von Mises' *Human Action* can be mind-changing.

Recently I came across a little essay in a book called *Adventures of Ideas*, by Alfred North Whitehead, the British philosopher and Harvard professor. The essay, "From Force to Persuasion," had a profound effect upon me. Actually, what caught my attention was a single passage on page 83. This one small excerpt in a 300-page book changed my entire political philosophy.

Here's what it says:

"The creation of the world – said Plato – is the victory of persuasion over force... Civilization is the maintenance of social order, by its own inherent persuasiveness as embodying the nobler alternative. The recourse to force, however unavoidable, is a disclosure of the failure of civilization, either in the general society or in a remnant of individuals..."

"Now the intercourse between individuals and between social groups takes one of these two forms: force or persuasion. Commerce is the great example of intercourse by way of persuasion. War, slavery, and governmental compulsion exemplify the reign of force."

Professor Whitehead's vision of civilized society as the triumph of persuasion over force should become paramount in the mind of all civic-minded individuals and government leaders. It should serve as the guideline for the political ideal.

Let me suggest, therefore, a new political creed: The triumph of persuasion over force is the sign of a civilized society.

Surely this is a fundamental principle to which most citizens, no matter where they fit on the political spectrum, can agree.

Too Many Laws

Too often lawmakers resort to the force of law rather than the power of persuasion to solve a problem in society. They are too quick to pass another statute or regulation in an effort to suppress the effects of a deep-rooted problem in society rather than seeking to recognize and deal with the real cause of the problem, which may require parents, teachers, pastors, and community leaders to convince people to change their ways.

Too often politicians think that new programs requiring new taxes are the only way to pay for citizens' retirement, health care, education or other social needs. "People just aren't willing to pay for these services themselves," they say, so they force others to pay for them instead.

Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes once said, "Taxation is the price we pay for civilization." But isn't the opposite really the case? Taxation is the price we pay for failing to build a civilized society. The higher the tax level, the greater the failure. A centrally planned totalitarian state represents a complete defeat for the civilized world, while a totally voluntary society represents its ultimate success.

Thus, legislators, ostensibly concerned about poverty and low wages, pass a minimum wage law and establish a welfare state as their way to abolish poverty. Yet poverty persists, not for want of money, but for want of skills, capital, education, and the desire to succeed.

The community demands a complete education for all children, so the state mandates that all children attend school for at least ten years. Winter Park High School, which two of our children attend, is completely fenced in. Students need a written excuse to leave school grounds and an official explanation for absences. All the gates except one are closed during school hours, and there is a permanent guard placed at the only open gate to monitor students coming and going. Florida recently passed a law that takes away the driver's license of any student who drops out of high school. Surely, they say, that will eliminate the high drop-out rate for students.

But suppressing one problem only creates another. Now students who don't want to be in school are disrupting the students who want to learn. The lawmakers forget one thing. Schooling is not the same as education.

Many high-minded citizens don't like to see racial, religious or sexual discrimination in employment, housing, department stores, restaurants, and clubs. Yet instead of persuading people in the schools, the churches, and the media that discrimination is inappropriate behavior and morally repugnant, lawmakers simply pass civil rights legislation outlawing discrimination, as though making hatred illegal can instantly make it go away. Instead, forced integration often intensifies the already-existing hostilities. Does anyone wonder why discrimination is still a serious problem in our society?

Is competition from the Japanese, the Germans and the Brazilians too stiff for American industry? We can solve that right away, says Congress. No use trying to convince industry to invest in more productive labor and capital, or voting to reduce the tax burden on business. No, they'll just impose import quotas or heavy duties on foreign products and force them to "play fair." Surely that will make us more competitive, and keep American companies in business.

Drugs, Guns, and Abortion

Is the use of mind-altering drugs a problem in America? Then let's pass legislation prohibiting the use of certain high-powered drugs. People still want to use them? Then let's hire more police to crack down on the drug users and drug dealers. Surely that will solve the problem. Yet such laws never address the fundamental issue, which would require analyzing why people misuse drugs and discovering ways they can satisfy their needs in a nondestructive manner. By outlawing illicit drugs, we fail to consider the underlying cause of increased drug or alcohol misuse among teenagers and adults, and we fail to accept the beneficial uses of such drugs in medicine and health-care. I salute voluntary efforts in communities to deal with these serious problems, such as "no alcohol" high school graduation parties and drug-awareness classes. Tobacco is on the decline as a result of education, and drug use could abate as well if it were treated as a medical problem rather than a criminal one.

Abortion is a troublesome issue, we all agree on that. Whose rights take precedence, the baby's or the mother's? When does life begin, at conception or at birth?

Political conservatives are shocked by the millions of legal killings that take place every year in America and around the world. How can we sing "God Bless America" with this epidemic plaguing our nation? So, for many conservatives the answer is simple: Ban abortions! Force women to give birth to their unexpected and unwanted babies. That will solve the problem. This quick fix will undoubtedly give the appearance that we have instantly solved our national penchant for genocide.

Wouldn't it be better if we first tried to answer the all important questions, "Why is abortion so prevalent today, and how can we prevent unwanted pregnancies?" Or, once an

unwanted pregnancy occurs, how can we persuade people to examine alternatives, including adoption?

Crime is another issue plaguing this country. There are those in society who want to ban handguns, rifles and other firearms, or at least have them tightly controlled and registered, in an attempt to reduce crime. We can solve the murder and crime problem in this country, they reason, simply by passing a law taking away the weapons of murder. No guns, no killings. Simple, right? Yet they only change the outward symptoms, while showing little interest in finding ways to discourage a person from becoming criminal or violent in the first place.

Legislators should be slow to pass laws to protect people against themselves. While insisting on a woman's "right to choose" in one area, they deny men and women the right to choose in every other area. Unfortunately, they are all too quick to act. Drivers aren't wearing their seatbelts? Let's pass a mandatory seatbelt law. Motorcyclists aren't wearing helmets? Let's mandate helmets. We'll force people to be responsible!

More Than Just Freedom

How did we get into this situation, where lawmakers feel compelled to legislate personal behavior "for our own good"? Often we only have ourselves to blame.

The lesson is clear: If we are going to preserve what personal and economic freedom we have left in this country, we had better act responsibly, or our freedom is going to be taken away. Too many detractors think that freedom is nothing more than the right to act irresponsibly. They equate liberty with libertine behavior: that the freedom to choose whether to have an abortion means that they should have an abortion, that the freedom to take drugs means that they should take drugs, that the legalization of gambling means that they should play the roulette wheel.

It is significant that Professor Whitehead chose the word "persuasion," not simply "freedom," as the ideal characteristic of the civilized world. The word "persuasion" embodies both freedom of choice and responsibility for choice. In order to persuade, you must have a moral philosophy, a system of right and wrong, with which you govern yourself. You want to persuade people to do the right thing not because they have to, but because they want to.

There is little satisfaction from doing good if individuals are mandated to do the right thing. Character and responsibility are built when people voluntarily choose right over wrong, not when they are forced to do so. A soldier will feel a greater sense of victory if he enlists in the armed forces instead of being drafted. And high school students will not comprehend the joy of service if it is mandated by a community-service requirement for graduation.

Admittedly, there will be individuals in a free society who will make the wrong choices, who will become drug addicts and alcoholics, who will refuse to wear a safety helmet, who will hurt themselves playing with firecrackers, and who will drop out of high school. But that is the price we must pay for having a free society, where individuals learn from their mistakes and try to build a better world.

In this context, let us answer the all-important question, "Liberty and morality: can we have both?" The answer is, absolutely yes! Not only can we have both, but we must have both, or eventually we will have neither. As Sir James Russell Lowell said, "The ultimate result of protecting fools from their folly is to fill the planet full of fools."

Our motto should be, "We teach them correct principles, and they govern themselves."

Freedom without responsibility only leads to the destruction of civilization, as evidenced by Rome and other great civilizations of the past. As Alexis de Tocqueville said, "Despotism may govern without faith, but liberty cannot." In a similar vein, Henry Ward Beecher added, "There is no liberty to men who know not how to govern themselves." And Edmund Burke wrote, "What is liberty without wisdom and without virtue?"

Today's political leaders demonstrate their low opinion of the public with every social law they pass. They believe that, if given the right to choose, the citizenry will probably make the wrong choice. Legislators do not think any more in terms of persuading people; they feel the need to force their agenda on the public at the point of a bayonet and the barrel of a gun, in the name of the IRS, the SEC, the FDA, the DEA, the EPA, or a multitude of other ABCs of government authority.

A Challenge to All Lovers of Liberty

My challenge to all lovers of liberty today is to take the moral high ground. Our cause is much more compelling when we can say that we support drug legalization, but do not use mind-altering drugs. That we tolerate legal abortion, but choose not to abort our own future generations. That we support the right to bear arms, but do not misuse handguns. That we favor the right of individuals to meet privately as they please, but do not ourselves discriminate.

In the true spirit of liberty, Voltaire once said, "I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it." If we are to be effective in convincing others of the benefits of a tolerant world, we must take the moral high ground by saying, "We may disapprove of what you do, but we will defend to the death your right to do it."

In short, my vision of a responsible free society is one in which we discourage evil, but do not prohibit it. We make our children and students aware of the consequences of drug abuse and other forms of irresponsible behavior. But after all our persuading, if they still

want to use harmful drugs, that is their privilege. In a free society, individuals must have the right to do right or wrong, as long as they don't threaten or infringe upon the rights or property of others. They must also suffer the consequences of their actions, as it is from consequences that they learn to choose properly.

We may discourage prostitution or pornography by restricting it to certain areas and to certain ages, but we will not jail or fine those who choose to participate in it privately. If an adult bookstore opens in our neighborhood, we don't run to the law and pass an ordinance, we picket the store and discourage customers. If our religion asks us not to shop on Sunday, we don't pass Sunday "blue" laws forcing stores to close, we simply don't patronize them on Sunday. If we don't like excessive violence and gratuitous sex on TV, we don't write the Federal Communications Commission, we join boycotts of the advertiser's products. Several years ago the owners of Seven Eleven stores removed pornographic magazines from their stores, not because the law required it, but because a group of concerned citizens persuaded them. These actions reflect the true spirit of liberty.

Lovers of liberty should also be strong supporters of the institutions of persuasion, such as churches, charities, foundations, private schools and colleges, and private enterprise. They should engage in many causes of their own free will and choice. They should not rely on the institutions of force, such as government agencies, to carry out the cause of education and the works of charity and welfare. It is not enough simply to pay your taxes and cast your vote and think you've done your part.

It is the duty of every advocate of human liberty to convince the world that we must solve our problems through persuasion and not coercion. Whether the issue is domestic policy or foreign policy, we must recognize that passing another regulation or going to war is not necessarily the only solution to our problems. Simply to pass laws prohibiting the outward symptoms of problems is to sweep the real problems under the rug. It may hide the dirt for a while, but it doesn't dispose of the dirt properly or permanently.

Liberty Under Law

This approach does not mean that laws would not exist. People should have the freedom to act according to their desires, but only to the extent that they do not trample on the rights of others. Rules and regulations, such as traffic laws, need to be established and enforced by private and public institutions in order for a free society to exist. There should be stringent laws against fraud, theft, murder, pollution, and the breaking of contracts, and those laws should be effectively enforced according to the classic principle that the punishment should fit the crime. The full weight of the law should be used to fine and imprison the perpetrators, to compensate the victims, and to safe-guard the rights of the innocent. Yet within this legal framework, we should permit the maximum degree of freedom in allowing people to choose what they think, act and do to themselves without

harming others.

Convincing the public of our message, that “persuasion instead of force is the sign of a civilized society,” will require a lot of hard work, but it can be rewarding. The key is to make a convincing case for freedom, to present the facts to the public so that they can see the logic of our arguments, and to develop a dialogue with those who may be opposed to our position. Our emphasis must be on educating and persuading, not on arguing and name-calling. For we shall never change our political leaders until we change the people who elect them.

A Vision of an Ideal Society

Martin Luther King, Jr., gave a famous sermon at the Lincoln Memorial in the mid-1960s. In it, King said that he had a dream about the promised land. Well, I too have a vision of an ideal society.

I have a vision of world peace, not because the military have been called in to maintain order, but because we have peace from within and friendship with every nation.

I have a vision of universal prosperity and an end to poverty, not because of foreign aid or government-subsidized welfare, but because each of us has productive, useful employment where every trade is honest and beneficial to both buyer and seller, and where we eagerly help the less fortunate of our own free will.

I have a vision of an inflation-free nation, not because of wage and price controls, but because our nation has an honest money system.

I have a vision of a crime-free society, not because there's a policeman on every corner, but because we respect the rights and property of others.

I have a vision of a drug-free America, not because harmful drugs are illegal, but because we desire to live long, healthy, self-sustaining lives.

I have a vision of an abortion-free society, not because abortion is illegal, but because we firmly believe in the sanctity of life, sexual responsibility, and family values.

I have a vision of a pollution-free and environmentally-sound world, not because of costly controls and arbitrary regulations, but because private enterprise honors its stewardship and commitment to developing rather than exploiting the earth's resources.

I have a vision of a free society, not because of a benevolent dictator commands it, but because we love freedom and the responsibility that goes with it.

The following words, taken from an old Protestant hymn whose author is fittingly

anonymous, express the aspiration of every man and every woman in a free society.

*Know this, that every soul is free,
To choose his life and what he'll be;
For this eternal truth is given,
That God will force no man to heaven.*

*He'll call, persuade, direct aright,
And bless with wisdom, love, and light,
In nameless ways be good and kind,
But never force the human mind.*

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Next - Section One - Chapter 2, "Coercivists and Voluntarists" by Donald J. Boudreaux