

Freedom Works Both Ways

Written by Dean Russell for The Voluntaryist, June 1989.

Everybody says he's in favor of freedom. Even the Soviet leaders claim to be fighting for freedom. So did Hitler. Our own leaders are also for freedom. So was my slave-owning grandfather.

But my grandfather failed to understand the fact that freedom is a mutual relationship; that it works both ways. He thought that he himself remained completely free even though he restricted the freedom of others. He never grasped the obvious fact that his participation in slavery controlled him and his actions just as it controlled his slaves and their actions. Both my grandfather and his slaves would have been richer – materially as well as spiritually – if he had freed his slaves, offered them the competitive market wage for their services, and left them totally responsible for their own actions and welfare. But like most of us today, he continues to believe that some persons – without injury to themselves – can legally force other persons to conform to their wishes and plans. He learned the hard way.

Hitler and Stalin were also victims of the systems they created and enforced. Their “food tasters,” bullet-proof cars, personal bodyguards and constant fears of assassination were the visible evidence of a part of the freedom they lost when they decided to force *peaceful* persons to conform to their wills and viewpoints. Knowingly or unknowingly, they lost a great deal of their own freedom when they deprived others of their freedom. That's the way it always works.

Apparently, our own political leaders, regardless of party are also unaware that freedom is a mutual relationship among persons; that it works both ways. Like my grandfather, they are under the delusion that freedom is something which one person can take from another with no effect on the freedom of the person doing the taking – especially if it's legal. If they thought otherwise, they would stop most of the things they are now doing. In the good name of freedom, our leaders now force others to conform to their viewpoints and prejudices on housing, savings and retirement, military service, electricity production, hours of work, wages, education and a host of other items which form the major part of every person's daily life. All of these are restrictions against freedom because they are enforced against *peaceful* persons who would not participate voluntarily. The freedom of the American people – like the freedom of legal slaves – is lost to whatever extent they are forced to conform to the ideas, whims and viewpoints of others. That is all that slavery is. And the fact that the current restrictions and compulsions are legal doesn't deny that they are acts against freedom; the slavery of 1860 was also legal!

As long as our officials continue to deprive peaceful persons of their right to use their time

and earnings as they please, the officials will continue to lose a part of their own freedom along with the rest of us. As long as they continue to believe that freedom permits or obligates them to force their ideas upon peaceful persons who do not wish to participate, the system they have created enslaves them also. They obviously don't understand it, but they are somewhat like the man sitting on the chest of a person he has pinned to the ground; as long as he sits there, he restricts his own freedom about as much as he restricts the freedom of his victim.

The officials who endorse and defend this system of legalized compulsions and prohibitions against peaceful persons are compelled to spend most of their time discussing ways and means - such as propaganda, secrecy, guile, deceit, laws, policemen, courts, jails, fines and so on - to force the rest of us to conform to their ideas and plans which we would reject if we were permitted a real choice in the matter. As long as they continue to enforce this mutually degrading process, they restrict and destroy the potentialities they have within themselves for advancement toward human understanding and some worthwhile ideal or goal. Sooner or later, the restrictions and compulsions they enforce against others will culminate in some type of an upheaval by an aroused and angry society which the officials can no longer control. Acts against human freedom - legal or illegal - have *always* worked that way. The fact that the intentions of most of our officials are so good only makes it sadder.

Some day we may realize that freedom is a relationship of *mutual* nonmolestation among persons wherein no person uses violence or the threat of violence to impose his will or viewpoint upon any other person. When enough of us understand this idea, we will begin to enjoy as much peace and prosperity as it is possible for us to have on earth.