

“Legal” or “Lawful”

Ah. Counting on magic words to save you.

Recently I saw someone make a desperate appeal to their perception of a difference between “legal” and “lawful”. They were attempting to make a “founding father” look like something other than the nasty old statist he was, by their tortured interpretation of something he had said about “lawful authority”.

The fellow trying to justify the dead statist’s words was trying to claim that “lawful” meant “*in accordance with natural law*”, as opposed to “legal”, which meant only that someone made up some legislation and called it a law.

Not that there can be any political “authority” in accordance with natural law, but whatever.

Still, I was willing to consider his point, so I looked up the two words in question.

legal– permitted by law; **lawful**; of or relating to law; connected with the law or its administration.

appointed, established, or authorized by law; deriving authority from law.

Oops. That “lawful” in there is terribly inconvenient. But, moving right along...

lawful— allowed or permitted by law; not contrary to law; legitimate; appointed or recognized by law; acting or living according to the law.

Trying to read any meaningful difference into those definitions is an impossible task.

However, I’m sympathetic. I know dictionaries are often wrong; relying on incorrect (but popular and common) usage for their definitions. Look how often they conflate “anarchy” with “chaos” for example.

So, when there’s good reason to stray from a bad dictionary definition, I support that move completely.

But, to try to find a good definition for a word so that you can feel good about an old, dead

statist is probably pointless if liberty is something you value.