

On Liberty and Security

“Those who would give up essential Liberty, to purchase a little temporary Safety, deserve neither Liberty nor Safety.” Benjamin Franklin’s famous words are often quoted because, alas, they are always relevant.

Whether Franklin meant what libertarians take him to have meant has been challenged in recent years. See this disagreement between Benjamin Wittes and Leya Delray. In defense of her interpretation, Delray argues that Franklin shed light on his meaning when he quoted himself 20 years later.

Whoever is right, for Franklin the word *liberty* on these occasions meant not individual freedom but colonial “self-government” independent of the king of England and those to whom he had granted land in the New World. And for Franklin, the powers of such a government include the power to tax. Franklin thus was defending the collective “freedom” of Americans through their colonial legislatures (that is, majority rule) against undemocratic rule from afar. (Pennsylvania was a proprietary colony granted to the Penn family by the king of England. The family-appointed governor had repeatedly vetoed bills from the legislature that included provisions to tax the family’s proprietary estate to pay for the defense of frontier settlements during the French and Indian War. The family objected but offered instead to pay a lump sum for that defense in return for a legislative renunciation of its power to tax the family land.)

In my view, Delray makes a better case than Wittes, but whatever Franklin had in mind, we as libertarians are free to apply Franklin’s words to the individual rather than the collective. After all, we’re methodological individualists, who realize that no group can possess rights not possessed by its members. So let’s do so. (Another Benjamin — the French-Swiss classical liberal Benjamin Constant — had important insights about the critical difference between individual freedom and so-called collective freedom in his must-read 1819 essay “The Liberty of Ancients Compared with that of Moderns.” Spoiler: Three cheers for modernity!)

Many points could be made about the trade-off allegedly required between liberty and safety, or security. For starters, can they really be traded off? The libertarian philosopher Roderick Long thinks not:

What we want is not to be attacked or coercively interfered with – by anyone, be they our own government, other nations’ governments, or private actors. Would you call that freedom? or would you call it security?

You can’t trade off freedom against security because they’re exactly the same thing.

Consider what's happening in China. In the name of delivering the impossible — zero COVID-19 — the people have been deprived of all liberty. Are they more secure for this deprivation? The virus is spreading apace anyway, *and* people are dying and suffering because whatever freedom they had previously has been curtailed. It is inspiring to see so many Chinese protesting their oppression in cities throughout the country. How sad that many other Chinese are willing brutally to police the people who are demanding freedom and justice.

Another way to look at the alleged trade-off between freedom and security is to realize that one doesn't gain actual security through state limits on freedom but rather a *false sense of security*. A false sense of security is worse than no sense of security at all.

When the state, even a democratic one, assumes the role as security provider, how do we know it will actually provide security rather than make us less safe? Because politicians and bureaucrats (think Anthony Fauci) say so? Because elected officials will accurately identify and appoint well-meaning and expert bureaucrats? A good deal of faith is expected on the part of the people who will be compelled to obey the resulting decrees. This model of governance also ignores the fact discovering what ought to be done in a given situation requires a decentralized competitive process in which competing hypotheses and theories are freely aired. Centralization in this realm suffers from the same fatal calculation and knowledge problems of central economic planning.

At any rate, what assurance does anyone have that the experts, who are human beings, will not err or act corruptly? We have no assurance at all. Even if a state official gets caught in a blunder or corrupt act, the likelihood that he will be held accountable is minuscule. Good luck suing that person. As for mounting an effort to defeat a politician at the polls, good luck with that too.

The doctrine that a democratic state (as opposed to a society of individual liberty and consensual social cooperation) can deliver security is actually rather peculiar. It's based on the curious principle that while we are too incompetent to manage our own lives through individual action and voluntary cooperation, we are perfectly competent to pick other people to manage our lives coercively. No one better exposed this contradiction than Frédéric Bastiat, the great 19th-century French classical liberal economist and legal philosopher. In *The Law* he wrote:

What is the attitude of the democrat when political rights are under discussion? How does he regard the people when a legislator is to be chosen? Ah, then it is claimed that the people have an instinctive wisdom; they are gifted with the finest perception; their will is always right; the general will cannot err; voting cannot be too universal.

When it is time to vote, apparently the voter is not to be asked for any guarantee of

his wisdom. His will and capacity to choose wisely are taken for granted. Can the people be mistaken? Are we not living in an age of enlightenment? What! are the people always to be kept on leashes? Have they not won their rights by great effort and sacrifice? Have they not given ample proof of their intelligence and wisdom? Are they not adults? Are they not capable of judging for themselves? Do they not know what is best for themselves? Is there a class or a man who would be so bold as to set himself above the people, and judge and act for them? No, no, the people are and should be free. They desire to manage their own affairs, and they shall do so.

But when the legislator is finally elected — ah! then indeed does the tone of his speech undergo a radical change. The people are returned to passiveness, inertness, and unconsciousness; the legislator enters into omnipotence. Now it is for him to initiate, to direct, to propel, and to organize. Mankind has only to submit; the hour of despotism has struck. We now observe this fatal idea: The people who, during the election, were so wise, so moral, and so perfect, now have no tendencies whatever; or if they have any, they are tendencies that lead downward into degradation.

Any reasonably intelligent person ought to see that it is far easier for us to manage our own lives than to select “the right” social engineers, with their compulsory one-size-fits-all plans, to do it for us.

It is said that neither freedom nor security is free. I agree. But must we pay coercive monopoly prices for inferior services?