

# Freedom to Decide

JOHN C. SPARKS

*Independent decision-making enables man to evolve toward his destiny, but this is possible only after he unshackles himself from other men who would obstruct his right to decide. . . .*

IN ONE of our best-known patriotic songs, we sing of our "sweet land of liberty." The implication is evident; it is good to live where liberty is present. But, how do we define liberty or know if we have it?

There is good reason to ask this question. As words, *liberty* and *freedom* are in common use, especially by politicians of nearly every political persuasion. Each faction promises freedom through its program, and forecasts the loss of freedom if the opposition wins. Though used to describe opposing programs, the words always are intended to connote something highly desirable. Are these words only something to be lightly bandied about in the politi-

cal arena? Or is there a deep and genuine meaning of liberty and freedom that is desirable and important to mankind?

Philosophical reasoning as to the desirability of things usually harks back to man's purpose on earth. Though we humans may never fathom Ultimate Purpose, the best clues afforded by Judeo-Christian and other religious philosophers suggest that each man's purpose is to achieve the highest degree of his own potential. Within this framework, mankind's favorable evolvment occurs only as each individual progresses toward his capacity. Evolution is the accumulated and combined changes in all individuals.

Each man can achieve only to the degree that he successfully overcomes those obstacles lying within and outside himself. To

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overcome internal obstacles is an important task requiring great concentration, for human weaknesses invite wastage of time and misdirection of effort. While difficult to conquer, these inner obstacles are nevertheless surmountable by the individual without anyone else's consent. Our primary concern in this discussion, however, are those outside obstacles that deny freedom to individual persons in their attempts to attain their goals. These external obstructions are numerous and can block an individual's opportunity to shape his own purpose.

External obstacles are of two kinds. In one the choice to reject or nullify the obstruction lies entirely within the person being obstructed; in the other the obstruction arises out of the coercive activities of some men toward others in society, and the choice to reject or nullify the obstruction does *not* lie within the person being obstructed.

### **Obstacles One May Avoid**

Examples of those external obstacles falling in the first classification are the domination of an adult child by a parent, the domination of a married person by his or her spouse, the domination of an employee by the employer, or the domination of its members by

a religious institution. The listing could go on and on.

One purpose of parenthood should be to provide knowledge out of personal experience and rules of good judgment so that a child, as he grows toward adulthood, may become more and more capable in making decisions for himself. A parent should gradually introduce his child to the art of making decisions. When adulthood is reached, the new adult may expect a parent to be available for consultation; but decision-making should rest with the new adult. It is better to rob a person of all his possessions than to rob him of his right to make decisions. One's own maturity depends upon knowing how important it is to refrain from violating another's right to decide for himself. Surely, the same principle applies to married couples, especially when one partner attempts to degrade the other to a second-class obeyor of instructions.

Another aspect of child development merits mention. Many sports provide valuable training aside from the skill peculiar to that sport. Baseball instruction not only teaches how to throw, field, and bat, but also affords the opportunity to train young minds to make a myriad of quick, individual decisions. The batter must determine within a split second

whether to swing at a pitch or not. Coaches constantly try to alert defensive players to think ahead about the choice of play to be made if the ball is hit to one of them. This choice depends on whether the ball is hit sharply or is a slow roller, how many are "out," the number and position and speed of base runners, and many other factors, all of which must come into consideration within a matter of seconds.

Adults working with boys' baseball teams would do a disservice to the young players if the game were stopped at the end of every play to instruct each fielder concerning the choice that should be made on the next play. Dismal results could be predicted in that case, not only in the scarcity of victories, but more vitally in the lack of decision-making development.

In the area of employer-employee relationship, occasionally an owner or manager of a business attempts to make all decisions, not just those pertaining to over-all company policy and direction. The employees consequently are denied the responsibility of decision-making in their own assigned areas of activity. The ill effects on all persons involved in such a situation can readily be seen. The employee is denied the opportunity to develop

his creative abilities. The employer or manager finds his job overdemanding on his time and energies, with results unsatisfactory even to himself. The company fares poorly, like an eight-cylinder automobile running on one cylinder. Such a vehicle is greatly handicapped in a race with other vehicles (competitors) moving along on full power. Obstruction of this kind may be as detrimental to progress as any obstacle raised by uncooperative labor groups. The problem also occurs within departments of many companies where the superior dominates his subordinates.<sup>1</sup>

Some of the most difficult external obstacles originate within religious organizations formed to point the direction toward right spiritual and moral citizenship. Among their leaders are those zealous to determine, in one manner or another, choices normally falling to individual members. Such action presumes the members are either too immature, too unintelligent, or too susceptible to temptation to arrive at proper decisions themselves. If so, how are they to gain maturity under a

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<sup>1</sup> For an interesting discussion of the problem arising from the superior-subordinate relationship, read "Freedom, Authority, and Decentralization" by Bennett E. Kline and Norman H. Martin in *Harvard Business Review*, May-June 1958.

system whereby others decide moral questions for them?

All of the external obstacles discussed above contain a high degree of pressure persuasion. None uses physical force to coerce the person being restricted, although the seed of force is there ready to bloom forth in all its ugliness. The adult child, if he chooses, can cast off the domination of his parents. The spouse can sever the marital bonds. The young baseball player can quit. The employee can resign. The member of a dominating church can resign altogether or transfer to another church. The final choice, as with internal obstacles, remains with the person himself — either to submit to the interference of others, or to decide for himself.

### **When Coercion Is Involved**

The second category of external obstacles differs from either of the previous obstruction groupings, in that it involves physical coercion (or its threat) against one's person. Refusal to comply with the directives of coercive force results in forfeiture of one's liberty or life or property. In this area, freedom of individual choice can vanish unless virtually all persons agree to protect each other against coercion.

Running through the great religious and moral codes is a com-

mon theme sanctifying the right of each person to his life and property — “thou shalt not kill . . . thou shalt not steal.” Most governments have laws against murder and theft, often punishable by imprisonment or death.

While almost everyone is aware that it is unlawful both in the eyes of God and of men for an individual person to murder and steal, a large number of society's members have become blinded to the very same laws of God in situations alleged to be more complex. The same society that prohibits any one of its members from stealing from another enacts laws permitting some to take the properties of others. The same society that would never tolerate the enslavement of any one of its members by another enacts laws withdrawing freedom of choice from everyone.

This is the area of deep concern. In the name of the *public good* and the *general welfare*, society through its organized government removes the freedom essential to *individual good* and *individual welfare*. Without individual welfare there can be no general welfare, no matter how sincere are those who believe that as a collective they are endowed with more and better knowledge and wisdom than any individual. How two boys, both of whom have

mastered the multiplication tables through the sixes, can together have more knowledge about multiplication than each has separately is difficult to reconcile with logic. Yet this is the illogical premise of those who expect government to excel at any task undertaken, and who even go so far as to withdraw from all private persons or groups the opportunity to try to solve certain problems at hand.<sup>2</sup>

One can only wonder at the quality of such faith held by these admirers of government intervention. Fans of a good football team usually urge a post-season championship game with another winning team to test the skill of their favorites. They have faith that their team can "take on" the best and come out victorious in a fair contest with the same rules applying to both contestants. Not so with the interventionist's faith, however. He urges government into the electric power field, for example, only on the condition that there be special rules in favor of government, such as relief from taxation, interest-free financing, and enforced investment.

<sup>2</sup> See Leonard E. Read, "Let Anyone Deliver Mail," *Essays on Liberty*, Volume V (p. 390) and John C. Sparks, "If Men Were Free To Try," *Essays on Liberty*, Volume III (p. 63). The Foundation for Economic Education, Inc., Irvington-on-Hudson, New York.

While people individually may choose to invest or not in a private power company, such choice is denied in the realm of government-owned power ventures; everyone must invest via taxation. Investors in a private company can sell out when they please, but not one of us can sell his individual "investment" in the government's Tennessee Valley power project. There is no faith among interventionists that government can attract and hold investors voluntarily or successfully compete on an equal basis. Faith is thin that must be supported by force of law.

### **Central Regulation and Control**

A philosophy in favor of big, powerful government that substitutes centralized bureaucratic dictates for the numerous separate daily decisions of millions of individuals, is a philosophy opposed to the growth and development of each individual person in the country. Knowing the whole cannot exceed the sum of its parts, we must realize that neither can the growth and development of a nation exceed the growth and development of its individual citizens.

The man who is required to pay social security tax as a hedge against his old age is not likely to develop respect for frugality. The wage earner whose federal income

tax is deducted before he possesses his wages is unlikely to develop a deep patriotism or vigilant watchfulness about the things his taxes go to support. A parent whose child is educated at public expense, forced to attend and to be taught a state-directed curriculum, is not likely to be concerned about thrifty use of educational funds or in the quality of instruction — until one day he discovers that his child cannot read. Then the parent discovers that he himself has failed the parenthood course of life, largely because the government education system had removed his right and duty to make decisions involving himself and his child.

### **Urban Renewal Problems**

The downtown merchants and landowners who receive the presumed benefits of the federal government's urban renewal handout will probably continue to overlook the voluntary economic decisions made daily by their present and former customers. These decisions point clearly to a new and changing world of shopping in which downtown is no longer the prime destination for the nation's housewife as she sets out to buy. The artificial aid will merely numb the recipient into a false sense of well-being while he is losing his customers. The builder of new apart-

ment houses in "slum clearance" areas will eventually come to realize that there is today a popular preference for living in the country rather than in the city, leaving too few tenants to return him a profit on his new apartment business. Developers of industrial tracts on "cleared" land may find that higher local taxation growing out of the urban renewal program is not an attraction to new industry. Every such interference removes, either by restraint or false lure of a government-conceived bargain, the vital role of decision-making by individuals.

### **Socialized Medicine**

Those citizens who clamor for government programs to artificially control the field of medicine unwittingly propose to rob their self-reliant fellow citizens (and themselves) in numerous ways. Since one step of government interference inevitably leads to further "free" service and control, one can logically expect an early proposal for government fixing of the maximum fees to be charged by doctors. This has happened in other parts of the world. A ceiling price is established by government only when the legislators believe that the prevailing price or fee is too high. When they fix it at a lower level, they hope that more persons can afford the treatment

or operation. A delicate but expensive operation, perfected at the outset by a few highly skilled surgeons, undoubtedly would be a blessing to many sufferers. The relatively high fee does not prevent a person from choosing between values; and if the restoration of vision, hearing, or other normal bodily function is worth the sacrifice of less-valued possessions, the sufferer will choose the delicate operation in exchange for the fee.

However, if government intervenes to fix fees, the choice to the sufferer will probably disappear. The surgeon may find it more rewarding, for example, to perform ordinary tonsillectomies than to drain his nervous strength in an intricate operation on the inner ear. This operation that has been restoring hearing to many grateful patients at an "open market" fee of several hundred dollars would not be available at all if \$50 were set as a maximum fee by government. A ceiling price always leads to the disappearance of the product or service; and a ceiling fee for the delicate ear operation would merely diminish its availability, with eventual loss of technical skill and doctor recruits in that specialized area. Such restrictive action would deny individual choice to many persons, doctors and patients alike.

### **Tax Barriers to Progress**

High tax rates on earnings and excessive interference and control is discouraging to those potential entrepreneurs who would start new businesses or expand existing businesses in our country. Some other nations of the world, meanwhile, have encouraged growth of industry there by reducing or removing government intervention. Growth and development occur when people live in an atmosphere of minimum restraint and maximum freedom. The policy of interventionism threatens to sap the strength of our country, for progress depends upon individual freedom to decide. Authoritarian obstruction emanating from Washington and the state capitols erodes, deeper by the day, our liberty to choose.

These are typical examples of the countless infringements by organized society against the right of its individual members to make their own decisions. Few of the foregoing examples show anything but the good intent of those who, through government, decide for others. Among the worthy objectives are cheaper electric power, certainty of saving for one's later years, convenience of paying taxes, education for all, restoration of the former downtown economy, lower surgical fees, and business regulation. But in the attempted

attainment of these goals, incorrect methods have been adopted, resulting in lost goals, and worse, lost opportunities to be self-reliant, decision-making individuals.

### **The Uses of Adversity**

Mankind favorably evolves only as each man progresses. Every person has to do his own fighting to achieve a worthy goal. As Charles de Gaulle put it: "The man of character finds an especial attractiveness in difficulty, since it is only by coming to grips with difficulty that he can realize his potentialities." It helps no one to remove the consequence of a person's choice. Each individual must of his own choosing overcome obstructions blocking his way toward fulfillment of his purpose. Such obstructions are sufficiently numerous and difficult in

themselves without other persons in society adding more obstructions through the organized coercion of government.

While a person may wish sincerely to be his brother's keeper, this activity should be confined to personal encouragement and making available such enlightenment as he has attained that may arouse his brother to achieve his own purpose. Coercion applied to him, even with a good intent and a worthy objective in mind, will do nothing for his development and may, in fact, corrupt both the coerced and the coercer.

The freedom to make decisions is the God-given right of every human being. Let us remove those governmental obstructions that prevent independent choice, and *restore the freedom to decide.* ♦

### **IDEAS ON LIBERTY**

### ***To What Can One Turn?***

THEY SAY no tyranny can match that produced by the vote of a majority. Many mad social schemes have been foisted off on the American public under the guise that "the people voted that way." Already our people have been driven from choice to compulsion, from self-reliance to the pitiable position of dependence. In the end this is certainly a grim circumstance. Progressive science proves that the future will be found in growth, not stagnation. Do we want the prodding road of self-determination and creation, or the seemingly comfortable road of dependence and slow degradation?

In the absence of self-reliance and responsibility, to what can one turn for true direction?

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# Bureaucratic Decisions

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GOVERNMENT-PLANNED agricultural programs aren't working out in the Soviet Union, or in Red China, or in other countries under totalitarian rule. For some reason, the plans have gone awry and there isn't enough food to go around.

The United States, at the same time, is plagued with more food-stuffs and other farm products than consumers seem to want.

Many Americans, who know perfectly well why Russian and Chinese peasants are facing a greater than ordinary threat of starvation, are thoughtlessly saying: "We'd rather have problems of surplus than of scarcity. And let's not change the nature of our problems by aping the methods of totalitarian governments that substitute the decisions of bureaucrats for the decisions of the market place."

The leak in that line of "logic" is that American surpluses do not

stem from decisions of the market place. The market encourages conservation of any resource in short supply and discourages further production of goods or services for which there may be a dwindling demand. Rising prices freely bid by consumers for a scarce resource tell present owners to handle with care the supplies on hand while doing their best to produce or obtain more of the item.

Declining prices, on the other hand, as reflected by decisions of the market place, tell consumers and producers alike that the item is abundant, that possibly new or increased use ought to be made of it, and that there is no great urgency to supply more of it at the moment. In other words, the market place reflects at once the best judgment of those buyers and sellers most closely concerned and most able to do something about the supply of and the demand for