
Vindicating Voluntaryism

BY GARY M. GALLES

Voluntaryism. Other than to those who have seriously considered the overwhelming case for liberty in human affairs, the word doesn't have a very catchy ring. As a result, it would not survive vetting by our modern gamut of political focus groups and public-relations gurus. Yet that was what Englishman Auberon Herbert used to describe and endorse the only social arrangement that does not deny people's self-ownership—voluntary cooperation.

Herbert, who was born in 1838, died a century ago in 1906. As well as being a member of Parliament, he was a writer, editor, and political philosopher. He advocated government "strictly limited to its legitimate duties in defense of self-ownership and individual rights." Therefore, he said, it must be supported by voluntary contributions.

Unlike many intellectuals, Herbert acted on his avowed beliefs in a manner that made him, as the late Chris Tame put it, "probably the leading English libertarian" in the early twentieth century. His writing, in the words of Benjamin Tucker, the libertarian-anarchist editor of *Liberty*, was "a searching exposure of the inherent evil of State systems, and a glorious assertion of the inestimable benefits of voluntary action and free competition." But in addition, he founded the journal *Free Life* and The Personal Rights and Self Help Association, was an anti-war leader, and more.

(For more about Herbert's life and philosophy, see his collection, *The Right and Wrong of Compulsion by the State*

and *Other Essays*, Liberty Press, 1978, and Eric Mack's "Voluntaryism: The Political Thought of Auberon Herbert," *Journal of Libertarian Studies*, vol. 2, no. 4, 1978.)

Auberon Herbert rejected the term *anarchism* for his beliefs because he believed in government empowered solely for the defensive use of force. Instead, he chose the term *voluntaryism* because it captured a characteristic that is true of "complete liberty in all things,"

but not of any alternative social "ism": the noncoercive "respect for the rights of others." In his words, "under voluntaryism the state would defend the rights of liberty, never aggress upon them."

If one accepts that every individual owns himself, which Herbert called "supreme moral rights," there is only one consistent form of social organization—mutual consent. From that he derived his view of the role of government: "[T]herefore force may be employed on behalf of these rights, but not in opposition to them." Any other state-imposed compulsion is illegitimate because it must inherently violate mutual consent, and therefore self-ownership. But such illegitimate compulsion is the core of government as we have long experienced it.

At a time in history when, despite occasional garnishes of boilerplate rhetoric in favor of freedom, the



Auberon Herbert

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practical philosophy of those in the innumerable tentacles of our governments is that they own as much of each individual as they choose to, Herbert's moral challenge to the idea that others have "a commission to decide what [their] brother-man shall do or not do" is essential to the defense of the liberty that remains to Americans. And it is equally important to any hope of expanding that liberty.

Herbert started from what he discerned as "the question always waiting for an answer: Do you believe in force and authority, or do you believe in liberty?" Self-ownership led him to the answer that we must "reject compulsion in every form."

Herbert identified self-ownership as the core of John Locke's trinity of "life, liberty and property." Further, he understood that property rights derived from self-ownership were the only solid basis for our mutual pursuit of happiness: "[E]ach man must be left free so to exercise his faculties and so to direct his energies as he may think fit to produce happiness—with one most important limitation. His freedom in this pursuit must not interfere with the exactly corresponding freedom of others." The sole way to achieve this was through "the fullest recognition of property." He drew the ominous implication for our era: "Destroy the rights of property, and you will also destroy both the material and the moral foundations of liberty."

Herbert also showed the logical contradiction between self-ownership and the use of government coercion to pursue happiness: "[N]o man can have rights over another man unless he first have rights over himself. He cannot possess the rights to direct the happiness of another man, unless he possess rights to direct his own happiness: if we grant him the latter right, this is at once fatal to the former."

Herbert recognized that without defending self-ownership and its inevitable implications, there could be no such thing as true morality. "Force rests on no moral foundations," he said, because "without freedom of choice . . . there are no such things as true moral qualities."

Further, he saw that justice (in its legitimate meaning, applicable "for all," as opposed to the many variants that apply only to some by denying equal treatment to others) was only possible under self-own-

ership: "Justice requires that you should not place the burdens of one man on the shoulders of another man." And the only way to achieve that is to recognize that "If we are self-owners, neither an individual, nor a majority, nor a government, can have rights of ownership in other men."

Herbert reasoned further that once we accept self-ownership, logic must lead us to also accept that "All these various wholes, without any exception, in which an individual is included . . . exist for the sake of the individual. They exist to do his service. . . . If they did not minister to his use, if they do not profit him, they would have no plea to exist." In other words, because it is not true that "numbers . . . take from some persons all rights over themselves, and vest those rights in others," no one can be legitimately forced to support any group decision against his will. Despite this fact, "Far the larger amount of intolerance that exists in the world is the result of our own political arrangements, by which we compel ourselves to struggle, man against man."

The Moral Standpoint

Auberon Herbert thought deeply about self-ownership. He recognized and was repulsed by "the odiousness of compelling men to act against their own wishes," not only from pragmatic considerations, but especially from a moral standpoint. He even put his beliefs in verse, as in the chorus to his poem, *Libertas in Excelsis*:

Each man shall be free, whoever he be,
And none shall say to him nay!
There is only one rule for the wise and the fool—
To follow his own heart's way.
For the heart of the free, whoever he be,
May be stirred to a better thing;
But the heart of the slave lies chill in its grave,
And knows not the coming of spring.

In our era, where myriad government bodies tax and regulate away individuals' self-ownership far beyond that when Herbert wrote, we need to hear and act on his compelling case for liberty, with its voluntary arrangements, as *the* organizing principle of society. As he

recognized, the alternative involves the widespread abuse of people's rights and is ultimately futile: "[A]ll the methods of restriction . . . are wrong and will only end in disappointment."

When Auberon Herbert chose "voluntaryism" to express his political philosophy, logically derived from the principle of self-ownership, he did not pick a term that modern spin doctors would have chosen. But it is hard to imagine a more promising future than that which it envisions, especially in contrast to the direction society seems to be headed today:

"Voluntaryism . . . denies that any good or lasting work can be built upon the compulsion of others. . . . It invites all men to abandon the barren problems of force, and to give themselves up to the happy problems of liberty and friendly co-operation; to join in thinking out—while first and foremost we give to the individual those full rights over himself and over whatever is his. . . how we can do all these things, without at any point touching with the least of our fingers the hateful instrument of an aggressive and unjustifiable compulsion."



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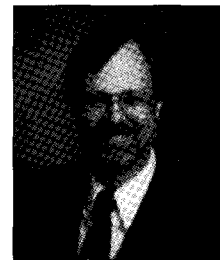
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BY BURTON W. FOLSOM, JR.



Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal was often hazardous to the health of the American economy. Sometimes it was even hazardous to the health of Americans. An example is Roosevelt's almost-forgotten decision in 1934 to cancel the federal airmail contracts. Here is the story.

Airmail service began in 1918, and the first such flights were done by the U.S. Army Air Corps. Private airlines, however, were improving so rapidly that soon after 1918 the government bid out contracts to major airlines to deliver the mail. By 1930, with almost all airlines losing money, President Hoover's postmaster general, Walter Brown, decided to award a few large airlines most of the mail routes. That decision was contrary to the law, which mandated competitive bids. Brown, however, did not believe that some of the low bidders, especially former crop-dusters, could safely, efficiently, and profitably deliver the mail. No airline in the 1930s could make a profit on passenger traffic alone, and Brown preferred to see three to five experienced airlines deliver the mail safely and show profits rather than have dozens of companies with varying experience and aircraft providing uneven service over the 27 federal airmail routes. For example, some of the interested airlines had no experience with night flying and no equipment to navigate through the fog and rain.

Perhaps the whole airmail system should have been privatized. The existing system of large federal contracts and self-seeking companies was an invitation to collusion and possible fraud. But the post office was federally operated, and Brown decided to scrap the competitive bids and give most of the business to the largest companies with the best-trained pilots and fewest accidents.

In 1933, with Roosevelt now president, Senator Hugo Black (D-Ala) launched a Senate investigation of

the whole federal airmail business. In testimony he discovered the absence of competitive bids, evidence of bribery, and possibly larger-than-necessary subsidies given the major airlines. Black urged Roosevelt to cancel the mail contracts and reopen them for competitive bids.

Roosevelt, who was receptive to attacks on corporations, became enthusiastic about the plan and wanted to cancel the contracts right away. Let the Army Air Corps fly the mail, the President reasoned, until new bids could be taken. However, James Farley, the postmaster general, wanted to wait a few months and transfer the contracts directly to the successful bidders. To pursue Roosevelt's

On the first day the Army carried the mail, three pilots were killed in two separate crashes.

request, one of Farley's assistants talked with Benjamin Foulois, head of the Air Corps, who said he thought his fliers could do the job. According to Farley, "[T]he President favored giving the service an opportunity to distinguish itself." On February 9 Roosevelt publicly announced that all airmail contracts would be canceled in ten days; the Air Corps would again fly the mail

for several months until new bids could be taken.

At one level Roosevelt's canceling of the contracts was odd. The airlines in effect had done what he was encouraging all businesses to do under the National Industrial Recovery Act (NIRA): organize, set standards, set prices, and raise wages. Under the NIRA Roosevelt had halted business competition and made legal the very thing he condemned the airlines for doing.

Even without the comparison with the NIRA, Roosevelt was vulnerable on two charges: he voided legally binding contracts and was risking the lives of the Army pilots.

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