

# EDITOR'S NOTEBOOK

## The trouble with Libertarians

by Dan Rottenberg

"What our society needs, I would argue, is not legislated sacrifice but the spirit of sacrifice—not people saying 'There ought to be a law,' but more people saying, 'There ought not to be a law.'"

The above quotation appeared in this column more than a year ago (Apr. 3, 1985) and launched me into three weeks' worth of ruminations about the relative merits of the "compulsory" sector (government, lawyers, monopolists) as opposed to the "voluntary" sector (the rest of us, who make our living through positive inducements rather than negative sanctions). "Our society," I argued, "has evolved to the point at which we now possess the tools to solve many of our social problems outside the realm of the law."

Ever since then, the *Welcomat* has received a steady stream of essays and letters from Libertarians who insist that I'm one of them. (Libertarians essentially believe that anything government can do, the free enterprise system can do better. They're sort of Yuppie anarchists: Instead of throwing bombs, they throw position papers.) Even as I happily published their missives and even found many of them refreshing and farsighted, I knew it was only a matter of time before they discovered the bitter truth about me. That time has arrived.

Specifically, on April 12th I wrote a column in the *Inquirer* suggesting that the SEPTA fare box should be eliminated and public transportation in the Delaware Valley should be funded entirely with taxes, just like the police and fire departments. My point was that in a major urban area there is no wiser and

more efficient use of public funds than to make it as easy as possible for people to get from one place to another.

Two good Libertarian readers responded with letters—not to the *Inquirer*, but to the *Welcomat*—accusing me of apostasy and inconsistency (Apr. 23). "I was very shocked..." wrote Warren Meyer of Fairmount. "In the past, you have consistently offered free-market solutions to socio-economic problems."

Well, the fact of the matter is that in the best of all possible worlds I would love to see free-market solutions to all problems, even military defense. Especially military defense. (How many wars do you suppose there would be if Reagan and Gorbachev had to seek voluntary contributions in order to produce nuclear bombs—even if they offered T-shirts and book bags as inducements?)

The problem is that we do not live in the best of all possible worlds, nor will we ever. A voluntary society, free of coercion of any sort, is a worthy goal. But the truly pertinent question is: What do we do, in the meantime? How do we evolve in that direction without impairing our day-to-day survival? How do we build on our existing foundations to improve our lot and the lot of the world?

The trouble with Libertarians—like all ideologues, left and right—is that they do not ask these questions. They do not think in terms of evolution. They look at the idiocies of thousands of years of human civilization and think only that these tragedies could have been avoided if their ideology had been in force. They fail to see that each mistake, however painful, was part of a necessary and valuable learning process.

People spent tens of thousands of years throwing rocks and spears at defenseless animals in order to eat; only the development of agriculture and (more recently) meat substitutes has emboldened animal rights advocates to suggest that all that killing may not be necessary. A century from now, eating beef may be perceived as sinful—like eating human flesh, or horse-meat; but two thousand years ago the same practice was a necessity. We could not have reached our present stage of enlightenment without the help of our brutish hunter ancestors.

Similarly, the world's great democracies all tolerated tyranny once upon a time—for the simple reason that, at the time, tyranny seemed preferable to the alternative, which was chaos. Only under the relative order provided by tyrants were people able to figure out ways to make tyranny unnecessary.

How do you explain, for example, that virtually every advanced civilization—Europe and Japan spring to mind—has at some stage of its history passed through a period of feudalism? (North America missed out on feudalism, but we did have indentured servitude and, of course, slavery.) Today feudalism seems archaic, but in another time and place it struck people as a good deal all around: the peasant farmer gave up his freedom in exchange for the feudal lord's protection, and in the process lands were cleared that no one had previously dared to farm. That

strengthening of society's productive resources turned out to be a vital step along the long, torturous road to a free society.

Thus each social system—feudalism, nationalism, capitalism, socialism, libertarianism—is not an end in itself, but merely a

new level in a society's collective, cumulative education. And the relevant question is not "What is the best system?" but "What is the best system for this particular time and place?"

My interest in free-market solutions to public problems stems primarily from my feeling that Americans have grown so sophisticated at communicating non-violently (through the media, organizations, unions, boycotts, demonstrations and, most important, the consumer's power of the pocketbook) that government may be much less necessary than we believe. But I wouldn't dream of suggesting the Libertarian model to present-day Russians—with their authoritarian mindset—or to 13th Century Burgundians, with their lack of books and telephones.

Thus every problem is best solved not in an ideological context, but in the context of its time and place. Huge public school bureaucracies, for example, may have represented the best means of educating America's huddled masses through most of the 20th Century, but they did their job so well that many urban Americans today are just as smart as the teachers and principals—and just as capable of deciding how their kids should be educated. That's why a city like Philadelphia would be wiser today to get out of the education business and simply give each school-age student a voucher to be spent on the school of his family's choice. But such an approach would not be the best solution in small-town or rural areas, which couldn't provide a variety of school choices and where the public school bureaucracies are still of a manageable size.

Urban mass transit, on the other hand, is the opposite case. Small-town and rural folks can get around by themselves today, thanks to the auto; city dwellers, packed tightly together, can't. By eliminating the fare box and thus unlocking the public's access to goods and services, we Philadelphians will relieve much of our other dependence on government services. (For example, if the unemployed could travel freely to and from job interviews, more of them would pursue jobs and public welfare costs would decrease.) Ultimately, as such a system pumped

unprecedented health into the city's economy, some entrepreneur would discover a way to make money on mass transit for less than it costs SEPTA to do the job, at which point government would get out of the transportation business, just as it ought to be getting out of education.

What I am saying, you see, is that "free-fare" mass transit is not an end in itself, but merely the equivalent of a "feudal" period in the Delaware Valley's transit evolution: It represents our most efficient means of economical survival until we come up with something better. Like feudalism itself, it's a phase we must pass through if we hope to reach the Libertarians' free-market promised land. There is no short-cutting the process. The means matter more than the ends. The by-product is more important than the product. Getting there is half the fun. That is the lesson of human history. I find it a pretty exciting lesson, myself.

Mark,

I misplaced your home address and wanted to get this off to you asap. My dialogue with Dan Littenberg continues, as the attached shows.

Perhaps you would like to add some fuel to the fire with your own contribution.

Best regards  
Ed