

# Freedom and the Pitfalls of Predicting the Future

BY RICHARD M. EBELING



The prospects for freedom in America and in many other parts of the world appear dim. Government continues to grow bigger and more intrusive, imposing tax burdens that siphon vast amounts of private wealth. Extrapolating these trends out for the foreseeable future, it would seem that the chances for winning liberty are highly unlikely. There is only one problem with this pessimistic forecast: the future is unpredictable and apparent trends do change.

Many years ago the famous philosopher of science Karl Popper pointed out, “If there is such a thing as growing human knowledge, then we cannot anticipate today what we shall only know tomorrow.” What does this mean? When I was in high school in the 1960s, I came across an issue of *Popular Science* magazine published in the late 1940s that was devoted to predicting what life would be like for the average American family in the 1970s. On the cover was a picture of a wife and children standing by a white picket fence waving goodbye to dad as he went off to work—in his one-seat mini-helicopter!

Inside, as best as I can recall, the authors talked about such things as color televisions, various new household appliances, robots that would do much of our work, and the use of jet planes for commercial travel. What was not mentioned, however, was the personal computer or the revolution in communication, knowledge, and work that it has brought about. When that issue of *Popular Science* was published, one essential element of the computer revolution had not yet been invented: the microchip.

Those authors could not imagine a worldwide technological revolution before the component that made it all possible was created by man. Our inescapably imperfect knowledge means we can never predict our own future. If we could predict tomorrow’s knowledge and its potentials, then we would already know everything today—and we would know we knew it!

This applies to social, political, and economic trends

as well. Most people in 1900 expected the twentieth century to be an epoch of growing international peace and harmony. In 1911 Norman Angell argued in *The Great Illusion* that war had become so costly that it would be irrational to be drawn down that path any longer. But, instead, the past century was the bloodiest and most destructive in history due to the rise of political and economic collectivism. The conflicts that collectivism brought in its wake have cost possibly 250 million lives over the last 100 years. No one anticipated this turn of events when the century began.

When I was an undergraduate in the late 1960s the textbook assigned in my first economics class was the seventh edition of Paul Samuelson’s *Economics* (1967). There was a graph that tracked U.S. and Soviet Gross National Product (GNP) from 1945 to 1965. Samuelson then projected American and Soviet GNP through the rest of the century. He anticipated that possibly by the early 1980s, but certainly by 2000, Soviet GNP would be equal to or even greater than that of the United States. Notice his implicit prediction that there would be a Soviet Union in 2000.

Which of us *really* expected to see the end of the U.S.S.R. in our lifetimes, without either a nuclear cataclysm or a devastating and bloody civil war? In the mid-1980s the often perceptive French social critic Jean-François Revel (who died in April) published *How Democracies Perish*, in which he expressed his fear that the loss of moral and ideological commitment to freedom by intellectuals and many other people in the West meant that the global triumph of communism under Soviet leadership was a strong possibility. Instead it was Soviet communism that disappeared from the map.

Who in January 1990 anticipated that Saddam Hussein would invade Kuwait in August of that year, setting in motion a chain of events that has now resulted in two

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American invasions of Iraq? Who in 2000 would have anticipated that Bill Clinton's eight years in office would seem, in retrospect, an era of restrained government compared to the explosion in government spending and intervention during the current Bush administration?

And who today knows what the 21st century holds for us? Let me suggest that the answer is: nobody. As the late Robert Nisbet, one of America's great social thinkers, once pointed out, "How easy it is, as we look back over the past—that is, of course, the 'past' that has been selected for us by historians and social scientists—to see in it trends and tendencies that appear to possess the iron necessity and clear directionality of growth in a plant or organism. . . . But the relation between the past, present, and future is chronological, not causal."

The decades of relative global peace and prosperity that preceded 1914 did not mean that war and destruction were impossible for the rest of the twentieth century. The ascendancy of Soviet communism and German fascism in the 1930s and 1940s did not mean that freedom and democracy had reached their end. And the persistent and current growth in government intervention and the welfare state does not mean that a return to the classical-liberal ideas of individual liberty, free markets, and limited government is a pipe dream of the past.

Human events are the result of human action. Our actions are an outgrowth of our ideas. The stranglehold of Big Government will persist only for as long as we allow it, for as long as we accept the arguments of our ideological opponents that the interventionist welfare state is "inevitable" and "irreversible." That is, the present trend will continue only for as long as we accept that the chronologically observed increase in government power over the last decades is somehow causally determined and inescapable in the stream of human affairs.

This could have been equally said about slavery. Few institutions were so imbedded in the human circumstance throughout recorded history as the ownership of some men by others. Surely it was a pipe dream to suggest that all men should be free and equal before the law. Yet in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries a new

political ideal was born—that all men are created equal and endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, which no other mortals could take away. So slavery, which Aristotle considered to be the natural condition of some men, was brought to an end before the close of the nineteenth century.

### Mercantilism's Grip

In the 1700s, mercantilism—the eighteenth-century version of central planning—was considered both necessary and desirable for national prosperity. Even Adam Smith, in the *Wealth of Nations*, believed that its hold over men's minds and actions was too powerful to ever permit the triumph of free trade. Yet in one lifetime following Smith's death in 1790, freedom of trade and enterprise was established in Great Britain and the United States, and then slowly but surely through much of the rest of the world.

We cannot imagine how freedom will prevail over paternalistic government, any more than people could imagine in 1940 a world without Nazism and Soviet communism, or FDR's New Deal. But that does not mean it's impossible.

Precisely because the future is unknown, we may be confident that trends can and will change. We cannot know today what arguments friends of freedom will imagine and successfully articulate tomorrow to end government control of our lives. But those arguments are out there, waiting to be discovered and presented, just as earlier friends of freedom succeeded in making the case against slavery and mercantilism. As Austrian economist Ludwig von Mises pointed out in *The Freeman* in 1951, "Now trends of [social] evolution can change, and hitherto they almost always have changed. But they changed only because they met firm opposition. The prevailing trend toward what Hilaire Belloc called the servile state will certainly not be reversed if nobody has the courage to attack its underlying dogmas." There is one thing, therefore, that we can predict: patience, persistence, and belief in the power of ideas will provide the best chance we have to achieve the free society we so much desire. 