

# NOTES from FEE

Inaugurated by Leonard E. Read in 1952



THE FOUNDATION FOR  
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## What It Means to Be an American: Let Freedom Reign!

Richard M. Ebeling

*The following is abridged from a speech delivered at "Evenings at FEE" in Irvington-on-Hudson, New York in November, 2003.*

In the early 1950s, Leonard E. Read, the founder and first president of the Foundation for Economic Education, began publishing a bimonthly newsletter with the title "Notes from FEE." He wanted to share with friends of FEE ideas on the meaning and importance of human freedom.

He considered this to be especially important for Americans because the United States was such a shining example of what a society of free men could achieve. The great American experiment, which began with the Declaration of Independence and the Constitutional order established by the Founding Fathers, had produced a special country the likes of which had never been seen anywhere or at anytime in human history.

America! For more than two hundred years the word has represented hope, opportunity, a second chance, and freedom. In America the accident of a man's birth did not serve as an inescapable weight that dictated a person's fate or that of his family.

Once a newcomer stepped on American soil he left the political tyrannies and economic barriers of the "old world" behind. A willingness to work hard and to bear the risks of one's own decisions, the possession of a spirit

of enterprise, and a little bit of luck were the keys to the doors of success in their "new world" home.

Visitors from Europe traveling to America in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Frenchmen like Alexis de Tocqueville and Michel Chevalier, marveled at the energy and adaptability of the ordinary American. An American paid his own way, took responsibility for his actions, and showed versatility in the face of change, often switching his occupation, profession, or trade several times during his life, and frequently moving about from one part of the country to another.

What's more, individual Americans demonstrated a generous spirit of charity and voluntary effort to assist those who had fallen upon hard times, as well as to deal with a wide variety of common community services in their cities, towns, and villages.

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Those foreign observers of American life noted that no man bowed to another because of the hereditary accident of birth. Each man viewed himself as good as any other, to be judged on the basis of his talents and abilities as well as his character and conduct as a human being.

Even the scar of slavery that blemished the American landscape through more than half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century stood out as something inherently inconsistent and untrue to the vision and conception of a society of free men laid down by those Founding Fathers. The logic of



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liberty meant that slavery would eventually have to end, in one way or another, if the claim of freedom for all was not to remain confronted with a cruel hypocrisy to the ideal.

What a glorious country this America was. Here was a land of free men who were able to pursue their dreams and fulfill their peaceful desires. They were free men who could put their own labor to work, acquire property, accumulate wealth, and fashion their own lives. They associated on the basis of freedom of exchange, and benefited each other by trading their talents through a network of division of labor that was kept in order through the competitive processes of market-guided supply and demand.

In this free marketplace, the creative entrepreneurial spirit was set free. Every American was at liberty to try his hand, if he chose, to start his own business and devise innovative ways to offer new and better products to the market, through which he hoped to earn his living. No man was bound to the soil upon which he was born or tied to an occupation or profession inherited from his ancestors. Every individual had an opportunity to be the master of his own fate, with the freedom to move where inclination led him and choose the work that seemed most profitable and attractive.

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*The fruits of collectivism are all around us. Government's hand is in every corner of our private, business, and social affairs.*

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### The Turn Toward Collectivism

Then something began to happen in America. The socialist and collectivist ideas that were growing in influence in Europe during the last decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century began to spread over to the United States. Two generations of young American scholars went off to study in Europe, particularly Germany, in the 1880s, 1890s, and early 1900s. They became imbued with socialist and state paternalistic conceptions, especially the interventionist and welfare statist ideas that were being taught at the universities in Bismarck's Germany.

These scholars came back to the United States enthusiastic about their newly learned ideas, convinced that the "negative" idea of freedom dominant in America – an idea of freedom that argued that government's role was only to secure each individual in his life, liberty, and property – needed to be replaced by a more "positive" notion of freedom. Government should not merely protect citizens from violence and fraud. It should

guarantee their health care and retirement pensions; it should regulate their industry and trade, including their wages and conditions of work. The government needed to secure the members of society from all the uncertainties of life, "from cradle to grave" – a phrase that was first popularized during this time.

These European-trained students and academics soon filled the teaching positions in the colleges and universities around the country; they occupied a growing number of jobs in the federal and state bureaucracies; they became the fashionable and "progressive" forward-looking authors of books and magazine articles; they came to dominate the culture of ideas in America.

How did they sway an increasing number of Americans? They asked people to look around them and observe the radical changes in technologies and styles of life. They pointed to the rapid shift from the countryside to growing urban areas. And they asked, how can such a transformed and transforming society remain wedded to the ideas of men who had lived so long ago, in the 18<sup>th</sup> century? How could a great and growing country be tied down to a Constitution written for a bygone era?

The Constitution, these "progressives" argued, had to reflect the changing times – it had to be a "living" and "evolving" document. Progress, for these proselytizers of Prussian paternalism, required a new political elite who would guide and lead the nation into a more collectivist future.

### Results of Collectivism in America

The fruits of their work are, now, after a century, all around us. At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century all levels of government in the United States took in taxes an amount less than 10 percent of the people's wealth and income. Now all levels of government extract over fifty percent of our earnings, in one way or another. One hundred years ago, government hardly regulated and controlled any of the personal and commercial affairs of the American citizenry. Now, government's hand intrudes into every corner of our private, business, and social affairs. Indeed, it is hard to find one area of our daily lives that does not pass through the interventionist sieve of state management, oversight, restriction, and command.

Perhaps worst of all, too many of our fellow Americans have become accustomed to and, indeed, demanding of government protection or subsidy of their personal and economic affairs. We are no longer free, self-supporting individuals who solely make our ways through the peaceful transactions and exchanges of the marketplace. We have become collective "interest

groups” who lobby and pressure those in political office for favors and privileges at the expense of our neighbors. And the political officeholders are only too happy to grant these political gifts to those who supply campaign contributions and votes as the avenue to their own desires for power and control over those whom they claim to serve.

It is sometimes said, “But we are still the freest country in the world. Our wealth and standard of living are the envy of tens of millions all around the globe. We should be proud of what and who we are.”

### The Standard for Judging America

Our present greatness in terms of these things, however, is only relative to how much farther other countries have gone down the path of government paternalism and regulation during these past one hundred years. The benchmark of comparison should not be America in relation to other countries in the contemporary world. The standard by which we should judge our freedom should be how much freer the American people were from the stranglehold of government more than one hundred years ago, before those proselytizers of paternalism began to change the political and cultural character of the United States.

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*The standard by which we should judge our freedom today is by how much freer Americans were one hundred years ago.*

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By this standard, today’s American people are extremely unfree. We have all become wards of the

state. And like the convict who has spent so many years in prison that he is afraid of being released and no longer having his jail keepers to tell him what to do and how to live, we are fearful of even the thought of a life without government caring for us, protecting us, subsidizing us, guiding us, and educating us.

Too many in the older generation in America have lost their understanding of what freedom means and why constitutionally limited government is both necessary and desirable. And the vast majority of the young have never been taught in our government-run schools the ideas, ideals, and political institutional foundations upon which this country of ours was created. They have been taught to think that there are no absolute truths or any important insights from long human experience concerning why individual freedom is a valuable and precious thing.

What those earlier German-trained political and cultural relativists set out to do in America at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century has been to a great extent accomplished. We are threatened with becoming a rootless people who have no sense of an invariant nature of man, and who possess no idea of those values and attitudes in the human character so necessary for preserving freedom and prosperity.

The Founding Fathers were not unaware that “times change.” But in the whirlwind of life they saw that reason and experience could and had demonstrated that there were unchanging qualities to the human condition. They understood the various mantles that tyranny could take on – including the cloak of false benevolence. They established a Constitutional order that was meant to guard us from the plunder of violent and greedy men, while leaving each of us that wide latitude of personal and economic freedom in which we could find our own

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meanings for life, and adapt to new circumstances consistent with our conscience and concerns.

This is what made America great. This is what made a country in which individuals could say without embarrassment or conceit that they were proud to be Americans.

### Our Task at FEE

The task for those of us who have not yet lost that true sense of the meaning of freedom is to dedicate ourselves to restoring and refining that noble American ideal of individual liberty. It is the American ideal that inspired and guided Leonard E. Read when he established the Foundation for Economic Education more than 55 years ago, in 1946. It is the purpose that continues to direct what we do at FEE every day. Let us work together to be the stewards of liberty so that

*Our task is to restore and refine the noble American ideal of individual freedom.*

freedom may, once again, rekindle its consistent and bright torch in the America of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

In the pursuit of this goal let us use as our motto and inspiration the words of George Washington, words that are inscribed above the fireplace in the library at FEE:

If to please the people, we offer what we ourselves disapprove, how can we afterward defend our work? Let us raise a standard to which the wise and the honest can repair. The rest is in the hands of God.

### Evenings at FEE



You are welcome to join us for our popular monthly program *Evenings at FEE*. Spend an evening in our beautiful 19<sup>th</sup> century building in Irvington, NY among other friends of liberty.

December 12, 2003  
Llewellyn Rockwell

Founder and President, Ludwig von Mises Institute  
*The Illusion of Power*

January 16, 2004  
Doug Bandow

Senior Fellow, CATO Institute  
*The Morality of Capitalism*

### Summer Seminars

We invite you to spend a week on our seven-acre campus exploring the roots of liberty. In summer 2004, we are offering a variety of seminars for both students and adults:

- Austrian Economics
- Freedom University (for undergraduate students)
- Freedom 101 (for high school students)
- Lifelong Students Seminar
- Teachers Seminar

Applications and scholarship information will be available on our website, [www.fee.org](http://www.fee.org), in February 2004.



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