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How Will Freedom Succeed?

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It is an honor to be associated with The Heritage Foundation, whose president, Ed Feulner, has been a good friend over many years, a real instigator and promoter, and served on the board of directors of the Acton Institute. It's also an honor, in giving the Kriebler lecture tonight, to be associated with the Kriebler family in this way—a veritable dynasty of entrepreneurs, scientists, and freedom fighters.

It is likewise an honor to be here tonight and to speak to you of responsibility, because I'm keenly aware of the fact that in this room tonight we have an entire army of crusaders for freedom. And in looking in your faces, I'm very well aware that this is just the tip of the iceberg. Back home you have left your colleagues and collaborators, Burke's little platoons, who are coming up with innovative challenges to government intervention in various ways. I admire you and thank you for the hard work that you do. You and your colleagues do this because you love and are dedicated to the simple idea of human liberty. You see it as your birthright, and you fight on its behalf. You understand that man precedes the state, and that the state, limited as it must be, exists for man, and not man for the state.

This is an idea with a long philosophical heritage and pedigree, but also an idea that must be fought for anew in every successive generation. We must renew that critical engagement, not just with regard to the *how* of freedom, but also, I think, with regard to the *why*—the more metaphysical questions. I fear that if freedom is lost on our watch, it will be lost because

Talking Points

- Human freedom is insufficient in itself to provide a good and prosperous life for people. It is not its own safeguard. Rather, it requires institutions to protect it and to ensure it and to extend it.
- The principle of subsidiarity aids us in limiting the power of the state, precisely because it is rooted in reverence for people. This principle says that human needs are best met at their most local level where people can act as neighbors to people in need.
- The politicized society operates on the principle of fragmentation; it is a kind of renaissance of Marxist taxonomy of the class struggle. This can be seen when government becomes the resource of first resort.
- We must make the re-building of the free society once more a moral adventure. For its construction was morally inspired in the first place. It emerged from a vision of man and his inherent and transcendent dignity.

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we have lost the memory of its roots, and have become fascinated only with its practicality and its efficiencies.

Efficiency, of course, is important. But remember this: The fact that one can accomplish something doesn't tell us whether that thing ought to have been accomplished. We have to look deeper, and my fear is that many today live off of the legacy of that heritage without refreshing, in each age, our grasp of *why* freedom was born. Let me illustrate it in this way.

Lesson from a Tree

I live in a religious community with several other priests. When we moved into our house ten years ago, there was in front of the house a huge oak tree that went up four stories. It towered over the house. It gave shade to our porch so we could sit out there, have our philosophical and theological debates, and welcome visitors.

One day, I was looking up to the top of that tree and I noticed that part of the tree was in full bloom, but part of it looked dry—the leaves looked dry and dead. And it was about that time that I made a great discovery. This boy from Brooklyn found out that there was something called a tree doctor. It was a rare enough miracle to see a tree in Brooklyn, but to discover that there were tree doctors—this was quite intriguing.

So we called the tree doctor. He looked at the bark and picked off part of the bark, bent down and picked up the soil and looked at the soil, looked at the tree and looked at the dead leaves. Then he walked up to the porch where I was sitting—with a face as grave as any brain surgeon having walked out of the theater with some bad news. He said, "I'm afraid if you had contacted me sooner, we might have been able to save the tree. But the disease has progressed too much." And then he pronounced his diagnosis: "The tree is dead."

Caught up in the emotion of the moment, I said, "But doctor, how can it be dead? It's got leaves that are in bloom? The majority of the branches are blooming. They're blossoming. How can it be dead?"

He said, "That is an illusion. The sap is still working its way through the tree. And it will continue to bloom on part of it, but progressively less

and less leaves will bloom. But the bigger danger is that this big massive tree is sitting right next to your house. With the right storm and the right wind, it will come down on your house. You have to take the tree down."

At times I wonder if we are confronting a similar dilemma today. It is clear to me, as I listen to conversations in the public square, that many people assume that the way everything is in terms of prosperity is the way it's always been. Too many people today are living off the legacy of the past, and all too many of the same people find themselves incapable of defending the heritage of Western civilization. Every day, many people simply assume that prosperity is part and parcel of the nature of life. Wasn't it always so? We forget that poverty and scarcity is actually the norm for most of the human race for most human history. It is prosperity that is the exception. We need to rediscover and retrieve those subtle, yet indispensable assumptions that are at the root of the most successful, the most prosperous, and the most liberal—in the correct sense of that word—experiment that the world has every seen.

The Dignity of the Individual

The first of these assumptions—these civilizational roots—that I am talking about is the dignity of the individual human being. The Declaration of Independence expresses it so well in very memorable language when it speaks of those "self-evident truths" and "certain unalienable rights." This view of man is an inheritance which is carved into the very foundations of Judeo-Christian culture. It itself is derived from a primordial text that accounts for who human beings are. I refer, of course, to the book of Genesis. In the spirit of broad ecumenism, I would like to make a side remark to those of you who do not subscribe to the authority of the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures or to a belief in a personal God. You also enjoy the benefits of this assumption that I'm speaking about and will describe. All of us—believers and unbelievers—are the heirs of something that you may reject as a theological claim, but which has nonetheless played a critical role in the birth of freedom in the West.

In Genesis, it is easy to overlook as mere rhetorical flourish the meticulous description of the cre-

ation of man, who is formed from the dust of the earth and into whom is breathed the breath of life. But let's ponder that image for a moment. What is being said to us about humanity in that icon? It communicates the view that the being who exists within the contingencies of the material world is not defined by those limitations.

What follows are the first words that the Creator speaks to the newly created human family. Flowing from this anthropological assumption over the ensuing ages is the concept that man, who must labor to support his life and his family on earth, must safeguard his liberty to create, and his ability to acquire property through which he can accomplish this sustenance. In order to decide how to order his existence and his survival, man must make rational free choices, which in turn implies that he possesses both free will and the capacity to reason.

On this basis, institutions have gradually emerged to engender and safeguard man's liberty as his natural right. Slowly and inexorably over time emerged the concept of the right to private property, the right to contract, juridical systems based not on caprice but on the rule of law, and the idea of the university so that we can refine our root capacity to reason and become better able to categorize and understand the varied facets of that creation of which the human person is the crowning glory and for which each of us will one day have to render an account to our Creator. Through the same process also emerges the hospital to protect man in his vulnerability. In short, the human race comes to respect the life of the mind, culture, beauty, and history as well as the dignity of life itself. In so doing, man fulfills his primordial vocation to have dominion, as the book of Genesis says, to the great irritation of the radical environmentalists.

Now this is not to say that these elements did not emerge fitfully or transitionally outside of the Judeo-Christian tradition. One thinks, of course, of ancient Athens or Rome in the time of Cicero and Cato, struggling to claim their birthright. But because these truths so often forgotten and denied in the course of human history are spelled out so plainly within the Judeo-Christian tradition, we should not be surprised that it was in European Christendom—despite all of its hypocrisies and fail-

ures, despite all of its fallen and fallible human leaders—in Europe's child, America, to use George Weigel's phrase, "that freedom was fully born."

It was born here in part because this tradition underlines not only the truth of man's material dimension. The sacred text says that man is not merely the dust of the earth, but as I've already said, he is vivified by the breath of life. This transcendence is at the root of man's dignity, raising him above the animal, and makes himself capable of infinite creativity to resolve the challenges of his fragile existence. Man becomes the bearer of an eternal dignity precisely because he has an immortal destiny beyond this world.

As a dear, deceased friend of mine, and a friend of freedom, Ed Opitz, once said, "Man must be free in society because he has a destiny beyond it." When we speak of freedom, we need to be clear that we do not mean "license." Freedom is, after all, a vacuum, an empty space, which must and will be filled by something. The mere potential for something says nothing about its actuality. To be a liberty worthy of man and his dignity, who pursues the truth because of the capacity of his reason for knowledge of truth, liberty must have an orientation beyond itself, a moral orientation to the truth of things as they really are—the truth of who the human person is in the fullness of his majestic dignity. And thus, reason, not force, is the means for man's survival.

Human freedom is insufficient in itself to provide a good and prosperous life for people. It is not its own safeguard. Rather, it requires institutions to protect, ensure, and extend it. We see the imperative of this as we look around us. In spite of the utter collapse of that colossal wreck that was once the Soviet Union, there remains vast and expansive threats to liberty that continue to abound because there is an inadequate understanding of liberty as the organizing principle of society.

When Lord Acton set out in the late 19th century to write that comprehensive history of liberty which he never completed—the greatest book never written, as it is often called—he planned to chronicle the growth of liberty from antiquity. How sad it would be, and how sad a commentary on the past century, that an updating of this work today would require the last chapter to chronicle liberty's decline

I know that many of you are in the policy-making business. I know that you research, write, debate, and pursue strategies to bring forth concrete proposals so that legislatures can formulate the very stuff of politics. As you do this, I hope you do it with the conviction that Lord Acton had when he said that “liberty is the political end of man.” In so doing, you have my great admiration, and, I must admit, also my sympathy, because this is no pretty undertaking. For it is often unpleasant, as Bismarck said, to view one’s sausages and laws being made. But we need our sausages and we need our laws, and we do well to know how they are formed, lest we consume the wrong thing.

Central Planners’ Fatal Conceit

Much of this process, of course, is a matter of prudence, not immediate principles. This means that there are times in the policy debate that people with the same goals will advocate different approaches to a specific problem. Not every difference of opinion over a particular bill constitutes a metaphysical clash between good and evil. Sometimes, it’s just a question of technique and timing. The point is so obvious that one hesitates to point it out. Unfortunately, that which is obvious is often ignored.

I wish that somebody could explain to me why such a manifest confusion between means and ends pervades so many policy proposals today. Why, for example, in the name of affordable health care, is a labyrinth constructed whereby the real costs of medical services are obscured by the cartels, regulations, and subsidies that unnecessarily raise costs and lower access to medical services while simultaneously impeding new research to bring about more efficient, effective, and affordable technologies for human betterment. This is no mean feat when you think about it. After all, it is urgent that we have good health care. The powerful myth that somehow medical services and needs react differently to the discovery and allocation process of the market than other goods and services must be exposed. P. J. O’Rourke put his finger right on the funny bone, as he usually does, when he observed that if you think health care is expensive now, wait until you see it when it’s “free.”

And how do you explain the phenomenon that some people love the poor so much that they design

and implement programs of social service to ensure that we will always have many poor people among us? It is as though these welfare solicitors were anxious to fulfill Jesus’ words, that “the poor you will always have.” The manifest failure of our welfare system, as is the case with so many well-intentioned emanations proceeding from the bureaucratic mentality, is that it ignores the lessons of Hayek’s *Fatal Conceit*. You’ll recall that Hayek’s posthumously published book argued that the fatal conceit is the delusion that the central planners can know all of the needs of society and all of the resources of society, and be able to coordinate and gather the needs and the resources together.

But, of course, no such synoptic perspective exists. It is a mere illusion. It results in scarcity, dislocation, impoverishment, and family breakdown, as the world saw on a grand scale under the Soviet Union.

Principle of Subsidiarity

The proper response to human need is neither the welfare state nor the Randian sneer, but a reverence for the human person. To confront such needs requires a full sense of that majestic dignity that each of us bear in our nature, as well as a good grasp of the truths contained within economics. The principle of subsidiarity aids us in limiting the power of the state, precisely in reverence for people.

This principle says that human needs are best met at their most local level where people can act as neighbors to people in need. It says that government assistance should normally occur in cases of emergency, and even then it must be limited both in depth and duration. It must never be a substitute for the private institutions that bear the prime responsibility for helping the poor to raise themselves out of poverty. To politicize charity—as I’m afraid the Bush Administration’s faith-based initiatives have done in using tax money to enable alleged good works—disregards the passion and the power of people working in their local congregations, in their local municipalities and neighborhoods, and even discourages those authentic efforts. It is these very efforts that are critical to the creation of a harmonious, prosperous, and caring society. To set up a mechanism whereby the best private and religious

charities end up becoming beholden to politicians is to forget that one day it may not be George Bush that they're beholden to, but it may be a President Obama or a President Clinton

And please, would somebody explain to me how so intelligent and prosperous a society as this one in which we live is becoming increasingly incapable of turning out well-educated students equipped to confront the challenges of the modern world? American students' average test scores fall below the test scores of many other nations. How is this? It is hardly for lack of throwing money at the problem.

Many of you know much better than I that studies indicate that the children of this country lag behind other nations in knowledge of geography, mathematics, reading, science. But there is one area in which American children excel: "self-esteem." They're unable to compute numbers, they don't know where they are or where they're going, they often cannot to read, but they "feel good" about themselves. The only thing that can explain this is the simple fact that our educational system has been so politicized that it no longer exists to educate students, but rather to support teachers' unions. How embarrassed I am that a group of Catholic teachers in New York and another place on the East Coast went on strike when the Pope was in the United States.

When the parents of this nation who home-school their children or send their children to private or parochial schools have to pay twice for the education of their children in the form of (a) taxes and then (b) private tuition fees, something is seriously wrong. This can only be remedied by placing the decisions of a child's education in the hands of the people who know and love that child the most: their parents.

Government as First Resort

The politicized society is not informed by this principle of subsidiarity, but operates on the basis of another principle: the principle of fragmentation, a kind of renaissance of Marxist taxonomy of the class struggle. This can be seen when government becomes the resource of first resort, but not merely in terms of the subsidies available to people and organizations. I am also concerned about the cultur-

al effect on the mentality of people. When you assume that "someone else will do it," and they don't, then you resent them for it. This results in a compartmentalization of our lives: the either/or mentality that separates one's work from one's family, education from the home, care for the poor from neighbors and the church, and health care from doctors and patients.

The same compartmentalizing occurs when the standards of morality that govern public life are divided from those that govern private life. This results in fostering the politics of division. No longer does Bastiat's vision of economic harmonies in which we are mutually interdependent one with another reign. Rather we become trapped in a vision of society in which people are seen intrinsically as being at each other's throats constantly: the worker's hostility to the capitalist; man's hostility to his environment; woman against man, and now, perhaps the saddest of all, the unborn child against its mother.

I heard a story some time ago that underlines this point of a dichotomized existence. A man was going on a picnic with a woman. They had scoped out a beautiful meadow in which to have their picnic, so they stopped at a fast-food restaurant to pick up the food. They got their box of chicken, went out to the meadow, put out the picnic blanket, and sat down to have something to eat in this beautiful setting. As the man opened the box, he noticed that it was crammed with money. He realized that this was the bank deposit from the fast-food restaurant he had just been in. They had given him the wrong box. He said, "Wait here, Honey. Let me go back down the road and get my chicken." And so he did. The manager said, "Weren't you just in here?" And he said, "Yeah, actually, I'm just bringing you this back." The manager opened the box and turned ashen.

The man said, "You gave me the wrong box. Can I just have my box of chicken? I've got my date waiting in the meadow."

The manager said, "No, no, no. This is incredible. You have to be acknowledged for this."

The man responded: "No, no. Just give me the chicken. I need to go."

"No" said the manager, "you have to be acknowledged. Let me tell people. Wait! I'm gonna call the

newspaper, I'll call radio stations. People need an example like this."

"Please," said the man, "Just give me the chicken. Let me go."

"No, I insist." And the manager picks up the phone to call the local newspaper.

The man said, "Put the phone down!"

The manager looked at him, and said, "Well, I admire humility, but why are you so aggressive?"

"Because the woman I'm in the meadow with is not my wife!"

Living the illusion of this dualism breeds an internal and external tension which affects and disintegrates both personal integrity and social cohesion. My point is a simple one. All reality is one reality. All truth is one truth. Our universe owes its existence to one source who created all things *ex nihilo* and who keeps them in existence. This also means that all virtues are inter-related, as are all vices.

The link between a good society and a free one is sometimes not easy to establish. Even when it is made, it is not so easy to secure and maintain. One would think that free minds, free markets, and lives of virtue would find a natural connection in this land of the free and home of the brave. But there are voices in our nation and in our world—some emanating even from religious leaders—who are suspicious of property and freedom and prosperity. I've met many of them in the course of the 18 years that I've worked with the Acton Institute.

We think very often that the misunderstandings of words such as business, competition, free trade, enterprise are intentional or always ideologically driven. Many times, they are, or perhaps they are politically driven, because there are, after all, politicians who have things to tax and people to fleece. And yet, what I have found in the almost 20 years now in my work, and what I have found in my personal experience (because I am a refugee from the left), is that more often than not, the problem is mere muddle—that people have not thought through or have not heard a persuasive enough argument, or have not seen the coherence of that argument in our own lives. That's far from unavoidable. There is no reason that this gap in social

understanding must exist between the entrepreneurial mindset as distinguished by its creativity, its willingness to risk, its insight, on the one hand, and the religious frame of reference with its priority to tending to the poor, the most vulnerable in our midst, animated by a love of God. These two approaches can be, are, and must be complementary—not adversarial.

Liberty: Rare and Precious

The time has come for a renewal of those principles that form the foundation of Western civilization—the very principles that make superfluous wealth possible and accessible to the marginalized. It was Lord Acton who observed that liberty is "the delicate fruit of a mature civilization." Liberty is, indeed, the delicate fruit of a mature civilization. It therefore needs nutritious soil in which to flourish. You and I are tillers of that soil. And in addition to being a delicate fruit, liberty is sadly all too rare a fruit. When one surveys human history, it becomes evident how rare and precious is authentic liberty and the economic progress that is its result. The 20th century—the bloodiest of all previous centuries—remains a vivid and sad testimony to this fact. As a delicate fruit, human liberty must be tended to lest it disintegrate. It requires constant attention and renewal, new appreciation and understanding. It requires integration into the whole of the fabric of society.

In a trenchant analysis of the free society, Friedrich Hayek offered the following sobering speculation: "It may be that as free a society as we have known it carries within itself the forces of its own destruction, that once freedom is achieved it is taken for granted and ceases to be valued." Hayek then asked, "Does this mean that freedom is valued only when it is lost, that the world must everywhere go through a dark phase of socialist totalitarianism before the forces of freedom can gather strength anew?" The answer is, says Hayek, "It may be so, but I hope it need not be."

Hayek offers what I consider a partial remedy. He says, "If we are to avoid such a development, we must be able to offer a new liberal program which appeals to the imagination. We must make the building of a free society once more an intel-

lectual adventure, a deed of courage.” He is right of course. But I would add something which I think Hayek would certainly agree with. We must make the re-building of the free society a moral adventure as well. For its construction was morally inspired in the first place. It emerged from a particular moral vision of man and his inherent and transcendent dignity.

In an essay, “The Weight of Glory,” C. S. Lewis memorably describes the anthropology that I’ve attempted to outline tonight. He says, “You have never talked to a mere mortal. Nations, cultures, arts, civilizations—these are mortal, and their life is to ours as the life of a gnat. But it is immortals whom

we joke with, work with, marry, snub, and exploit—immortal horrors or everlasting splendors.”

By all means, let us go about the critical task of demonstrating the hows and the whys and the utility of economic freedom. But in doing so, let us remember one thing: People will never go to the barricade for a point of utility. But for a moral adventure? For a deed of moral courage on behalf of human liberty? We will be able to raise a vast army.

—*The Reverend Robert A. Sirico is president of the Acton Institute for the Study of Religion and Liberty. He delivered the Robert H. Kriebler lecture at the 31st annual meeting of The Heritage Foundation Resource Bank in Atlanta, Georgia.*