



Written by [Steve Byas](#) on August 26, 2020

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## Freedom: The Key to Human Progress

Many years ago, I was verbally marveling at the prosperity of the United States in comparison with most of the rest of the world. A young college-educated woman heard my comments, shrugged her shoulders, and said, “It would be difficult to not be prosperous, considering the vast natural resources of the country.”

This being the 1980s, I countered that the Soviet Union had at least as many, if not more, natural resources than our country, and not only did it lag behind us, it was far behind Japan, a country well known for its comparable lack of resources. Besides that, I added, the resources here had existed for generations before our nation was even in existence, so it had to be something additional that has made the United States a country that millions of people around the world want to come to.

In a word, that additional difference the liberal woman did not understand is freedom. In the long history of the world, slavery and servitude have been far more common than freedom. This lack of liberty for the individual to chart his own course, free from the dictates of a government that assumes it knows best, has been what has caused most of the world’s population to suffer in poverty for centuries. The idea that a self-described elite know best for the rest of us is what Friedrich Hayek rightly called “the fatal conceit.”

Without the freedom to try something new — to innovate — mankind has generally been consigned to live on the edge of starvation (if that) for most of its existence. Instead, the static economy resulting from the control by the heavy hand of government led to little improvement in the lives of the average man and woman. Kings and queens certainly lived better than their subjects, but the standard of living of royalty up until fairly recent times would be considered poverty by most Americans living today.

Why is this? Perhaps more than anything else, Americans are partaking of the fruit of what the Founders implemented — a government that was restrained, leaving the population to excel by pursuing its own dreams, not the dreams of some king or pharaoh. As Henry Grady Weaver put it so well in his classic *The Mainspring of Human Progress*, “The only way in which men can remain free and be left in control of their individual energies is to cut the power of government to an irreducible minimum.”

The problem is how to avoid anarchy on one hand — a condition in which criminals would simply steal the fruits of one’s labor — and what history records as the norm for most societies, an oligarchical dictatorship. Solving this dilemma is what the Founders managed to accomplish at Philadelphia with the





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Constitution of the United States. Nineteenth-century British Prime Minister William Gladstone said of the U.S. Constitution, “The most wonderful work ever struck off at a given time by the brain and purpose of man.”

Most people are referring to the war for independence when they reference “the American Revolution,” but as John Adams said, the revolution was complete in the minds of the American people before the war erupted in 1775. He argued that the revolution began when the first English colonists came to the New World. By the time Thomas Jefferson wrote the Declaration of Independence, its philosophy was widely shared by those men who led the effort to secede from the British Empire.

## Government Protects, Not Gives, Rights

“We hold these truths to be self-evident,” the Declaration explained, “that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.” In short, governments are instituted not to hand out rights as they see fit, but rather to protect those rights that we already have, simply on the basis of us being humans.

The Constitution was written to implement the grand ideas of the Declaration of Independence. The preamble makes this quite clear — the Constitution was the Founders’ effort to secure the blessings of liberty to themselves and their posterity.

Freed from the restraints of governments of pharaohs, kings, caesars, and the like, Americans were free to innovate, to pursue their own happiness, rather than pursuing the grandiose schemes of an authoritarian regime. It was freedom, rather than slavery, that made possible what W. Cleon Skousen called “the 5000-year leap.” Before this, the standard of living of the world changed little over 50 centuries.

Of course, the enemies of freedom are ever present to stifle the benefits it produces. Because of this, citizens must continue to fight those who wish to go back to the times before the “revolution” of the Founders. As William Cullen Bryant said in the 19th century, “Not yet, O Freedom! Close thy lids in slumber, for thine enemy never sleepeth.”

American Founding Father John Adams knew it would require vigilance to keep our hard-earned freedom from being lost. He was dedicated to the task, explaining, “I must study politics and war that my sons may have liberty to study mathematics and philosophy. My sons ought to study mathematics and philosophy, geography, natural history, naval architecture, navigation, commerce, and agriculture, in order to give their children a right to study painting, poetry, music, architecture, statuary, tapestry, and porcelain.”

Adams could not have foreseen all of the fruits of liberty we enjoy today. Adams, Jefferson, Hamilton, Washington, and all the rest were not just concerned with putting more food on the table. Because of this unleashing of human ingenuity and energy brought on by Americans pursuing their own happiness, we and our ancestors have had more time to pursue our own dreams — whatever those dreams are — and also to improve our minds, practice our faith, and simply enjoy life — doing things such as taking our kids to a baseball game and enjoying a hot dog.

*Photo: Choreograph/iStock/GettyImagesPlus*

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