

FREEDOM

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FREEDOM

Freedom means *the absence of the initiation of physical force*. Physical force means injuring, damaging, or otherwise physically doing something to or with the person or property of another against his will. The *initiation* of physical force means starting the process—that is, being the first to use it. When one has freedom, what one is free of or free from is the initiation of physical force by other people. An individual is free when, for example, he is free from the threat of being murdered, robbed, assaulted, kidnapped, or defrauded.

(Fraud represents force, because it means taking away property against the will of its owner; it is a species of theft. For example, if a bogus repairman takes away a washing machine to sell it, while saying that he takes it to repair it, he is guilty of force. In taking it to sell, he takes it against the will of the owner. The owner gives him no more authorization to sell it than he gives to a burglar.)

Freedom and Government

The existence of freedom requires the existence of government. Government is the social institution whose proper function is to protect the individual from the initiation of force. Properly, it acts as the individual's agent, to whom he delegates his right of self-defense. It exists to make possible an organized, effective defense and deterrent against the initiation of force. Also, by placing the use of defensive force under the control of objective laws and rules of procedure, it prevents efforts at self-defense from turning into aggression. If, for example, individuals could decide that their self-defense required that they drive tanks down the street, they would actually be engaged in aggression, because they would put everyone else in a state of terror. Control over all use of force, even in self-defense, is necessary for people to be secure against aggression.¹

An effective government, in minimizing the threat of aggression, establishes the existence of the individual's freedom in relation to all other private individuals. But this is far from sufficient to establish freedom as a general

1. On these points, cf. Ayn Rand, "The Nature of Government," in Ayn Rand, *The Virtue of Selfishness* (New York: New American Library, 1964).

social condition. For one overwhelming threat to freedom remains: namely, aggression by the government itself.

Everything a government does rests on the use of force. No law actually is a law unless it is backed by the threat of force. So long as what the government makes illegal are merely acts representing the initiation of force, it is the friend and guarantor of freedom. But to whatever extent the government makes illegal acts that do not represent the initiation of force, it is the enemy and violator of freedom. In making *such* acts illegal, *it* becomes the initiator of force.

Thus, while the existence of freedom requires the existence of government, it requires the existence of a very specific kind of government: namely, a *limited* government, a government limited exclusively to the functions of defense and retaliation against the initiation of force—that is, to the provision of police, courts, and national defense.²

In a fully capitalist society, government does not go beyond these functions. It does not, for example, dictate prices, wages, or working conditions. It does not prescribe methods of production or the kinds of products that can be produced. It does not engage in any form of “economic regulation.” It neither builds houses nor provides education, medical care, old-age pensions, or any other form of subsidy. All economic needs are met privately, including the need for charitable assistance when it arises. The government’s expenditures are accordingly strictly limited; they do not go beyond the payment of the cost of the defense functions. And thus taxation is strictly limited; it does not go beyond the cost of the defense functions.³

In short, in its logically consistent form, capitalism is characterized by *laissez faire*. The government of such a society is, in effect, merely a night watchman, with whom the honest, peaceful citizen has very little contact and from whom he has nothing to fear. The regulations and controls that exist in such a society are not regulations and controls on the activities of the peaceful citizen, but on the activities of common criminals and on the activities of government officials—on the activities of the two classes of men who use physical force. Under capitalism, while the government controls the criminals, it itself is controlled by a Constitution, Bill of Rights, and division of powers. And thus the freedom of the individual is secured.⁴

2. Cf. *ibid.*

3. In a fully consistent capitalist society, taxation itself would be of a voluntary nature. On this subject see Ayn Rand, “Government Financing in a Free Society,” in *The Virtue of Selfishness*.

4. Again, cf. Ayn Rand, “The Nature of Government,” in *The Virtue of Selfishness*.

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Given the existence of government and its power to restrain the private use of force, the concept of freedom must be defined in a way that places special stress on the relationship of the citizen to his government. This is because the government's capacity for violating freedom is incomparably greater than that of any private individual or gang whose aggression it fights. One has only to compare the Gestapo or the KGB with the Mafia to realize how much greater is the potential danger to freedom that comes from government than from private individuals. The government operates through open lines of communication and has at its disposal entire armies that in modern times are equipped with artillery, tanks, planes, rockets, and atomic and hydrogen weapons. Private gangs number comparative handfuls of individuals operating clandestinely and equipped at most perhaps with submachine guns. Thus, freedom must be defined not merely as the absence of the initiation of physical force, but, in addition, in order to highlight its most crucial aspect, *the absence of the initiation of physical force by, or with the sanction of, the government*. The very existence of government can easily secure the freedom of the individual in relation to all other private citizens. The crucial matter is the individual's freedom in relation to the government.

Freedom as the Foundation of Security

It is important to realize that freedom is the foundation of both personal and economic security.

The existence of freedom directly and immediately establishes personal security in the sense of safety from the initiation of physical force. When one is free, one is safe—secure—from common crime, because what one is free of or free from is precisely the initiation of physical force.

The fact that freedom is the absence of the initiation of physical force also means that *peace* is a corollary of freedom. Where there is freedom, there is peace, because there is no use of force: insofar as force is not initiated, the use of force in defense or retaliation need not take place. Peace in this sense is one of the most desirable features of freedom. Nothing could be more valuable or honorable.

There is, however, a different sense in which peace of some sort can exist. Here, one person or group threatens another with the initiation of force and the other offers no resistance, but simply obeys. This is the peace of slaves and cowards. It is the kind of peace corrupt intellectuals long urged on the relatively free people of the Western world in relation to the aggression of the communist world.

Freedom is the precondition of economic security, along with personal safety, because it is an essential requirement for individuals being able to act on their rational judgment. When they possess freedom, individuals can consider their circumstances and then choose the course of action that they