



What Does Liberty Really Mean to You?

Aug 14, 2012 - 01:16 AM

By: [David Galland](#)

David Galland, [Casey Research](#) - For some time now – years actually – I have pondered the nature of liberty. Or more specifically, what liberty actually means to me. And to be extra clear, I am not talking about the meaning in abstract or philosophical terms, but tangibly – in much the same way I might answer if asked what my wife means to me.

The trigger for this entirely personal discourse comes from reading various articles and viewing various YouTube videos and speeches from self-styled champions of liberty (COL). There is even an entire conference, Mark Skousen's FreedomFest, dedicated to the topic.

Invariably, these well-meaning COL rail against "The Man" (something I do myself), accentuating their public angst by sharing stories of being molested by the TSA or otherwise inconvenienced by minions of the state. It is my contention that most of these individuals, and certainly the majority of "freedom-loving" Americans, don't actually understand the meaning of liberty, but rather give the matter little more than lip service.

And again, I don't mean liberty in an abstract way – like, say, "world peace" – but tangibly.

Now, before going on, tripping emotional wires as I do, I feel the need to quickly establish my bona fides on the topic. I start with the simple fact that with age, and 58 years old counts, comes perspective. In addition, unlike most of today's COL, I have actually been jailed for rioting against authority – at the naïve age of 14, as the result of actively participating in the toe-to-toe anti-war confrontations during the Oakland Induction Center Riots of the late 1960s.

In addition, as over-the-top as it now sounds, along with my now-departed friend and colleague of many years, Jim Blanchard, I spent many months assisting the RENAMO-led freedom fighters raise awareness in their fight against Mozambique's vicious dictatorship. The adventure ultimately ended up with us in a very tight spot under house

arrest in neighboring Malawi, followed by a high-speed car chase with the Malawian secret police in hot pursuit.

I have been directly involved with prominent members of the freedom movement in the US as part and parcel of my business career since a very young age, including running the 1980 Libertarian Presidential Nominating Convention in Los Angeles at the request of my friend Ed Crane, the founder of the Cato Institute. Furthermore, I have been friends, business associates, or acquaintances with too many well-known COL to recount here, starting with my business partner of many years Doug Casey, but also Harry Browne, Milton Friedman, and even Ayn Rand (I arranged for and hosted her at her last public appearance before she died).

And finally, I would mention my involvement in helping to create La Estancia de Cafayate in a remote wine-growing region of Argentina, without question the largest and most successful community of largely libertarian-minded individuals on the planet.

All of which is to say that I'm not arriving to this discussion fresh off the back of a turnip truck.

So, what does liberty mean to me?

In the simplest and purest terms, it means being free to come and go as I please.

Of course it would be my strong preference to come and go without the charade and indignity of transportation security instituted by most nations these days (ironically, the "Land of the Free" being the worst of the lot). But, unlike some prominent COL, I don't make the mistake of conflating transiting airports with protesting against the inanity of transport security.

That's because if I wanted to mount a protest against TSA, I would do it in an organized fashion. Say, by arranging for a large and loud demonstration at whatever passes for TSA's headquarters, making sure that the media was there to provide coverage. I certainly wouldn't do it *ad hoc* without media present, on a day when I actually needed to travel from point A to point B.

After all, like trees falling in remote woods, if a protest happens and there's no media to record it, was there a protest?

The polar opposite to being free to come and go as one pleases, the essential tenet to my personal definition of liberty, is to be trapped in a jail cell. Been there, done that – and very much have no interest in doing it again.

Thus, I avoid engaging in activities where one of the possible outcomes is being arrested and jailed. For example, making angry displays when a TSA minion asks me to take off my shoes.

Now, I realize that the degradation of principles and justice in countries such as the US means that pretty much everyone breaks a law or three every day, but miscarriages of justice resulting in an innocent person being sentenced to jail (or gunned down) are statistically very rare. Yes, they happen – but so does getting struck by lightning. Thus, when I talk about acting in a fashion unlikely to lead to being locked up in a cage, I'm talking about playing simple odds.

And no, I don't need to be a cowering sheep to keep the odds of my being jailed near zero. Rather, I just need to take note of the laws of whatever land my feet are currently planted on and avoid tripping over the big stuff.

In the US, for example, walking around with a bag of pot in your pocket could lead to jail time. In Uruguay or Amsterdam or dozens of other countries, it's legal. So, when in the US – again, ironically still called "the Land of the Free" – I can manage without the pot. (Actually, I've done without pot for many decades; I'm just using this as an illustration.)

Failing to pay the legally proscribed amount of taxes is another easy way to end up in jail. As a US citizen, there's no denying I'm trapped in a tax regime I find abhorrent and counterproductive to the building of capital. That's a big disadvantage compared to many countries.

But am I willing to trade my liberty for the money I might be able to hide from the IRS? Hardly. That would be the equivalent of choosing the latter when confronted by a gun-wielding thug demanding my money or my life.

Does this mean I'm powerless against the institutionalized theft of taxation? Not at all.

It just means I have to work harder to uncover legal ways to minimize the tax bite, starting by hiring good counsel. And let's not forget, for the citizens of most countries, minimizing the tax burden is as simple as getting on a plane, as – unlike the Land of the Free – they don't tax non-resident citizens on worldwide income.

As for US citizens, if the issue is important enough to you, there are specific steps you can take to legally avoid the taxes altogether, by replacing the passport you carry in your pocket. It's not particularly quick or easy, but if paying less (no?) taxes is that important to you, then there are clear paths to accomplishing just that objective without risking the loss of your liberty.

I'm not making these comments cavalierly, but rather to point out hard facts about the world we live in.

So, freedom to come and go is the core principle of my personal liberty. What else?

Well, part of that freedom has to do with personal finances. Namely, you can have all the liberty in the world, but if you don't have the money necessary to actually travel, you probably aren't going to get very far... at least not in a fashion you might enjoy.

While there are countries such as North Korea where the government makes accumulating any wealth almost impossible (unless you are part of the dictator's inner circle), in most of the world, this aspect of life – call it "financial freedom" – has far more to do with a person's willingness to work hard than anything else.

That said, I readily acknowledge that governments everywhere are a constant weight on the entrepreneur's back. Yet, simply looking at the facts as they are, I personally know dozens of people, here in the US – and in places like Argentina, where the government makes doing business an order of magnitude more difficult – who, through their own creativity and exertions, are fabulously successful.

As something of a tangent, while generalizations are rarely useful, in my direct experience many individuals who paint themselves as libertarians have trouble coming up with the proverbial two nickels to rub together. Doug Casey and I have discussed this on more than one occasion, and I don't think either of us has a good answer. If pressed to it, I would hypothesize that it has to do with a latent inability to work as part of a team, something libertarians tend not to be very good at but which is often required to launch a successful career. In support of that hypothesis, look no further than the reality that the Libertarian party has never been able to mount an effective national political campaign.

Back to the point, despite the government's meddling, financial freedom is imminently attainable for individuals who focus on their work and who put in steady efforts at increasing their personal knowledge (including learning how to handle your money, once you have some). Of course, succeeding may not be easy... it rarely is, though it can be.

While I'm sure there are additional nuances to my personal definition of liberty that I could mention, the big point is that as long as I am free to come and go as I please and have the capability to build the wealth I need to do so, then I have pretty much all the liberty I need to enjoy my limited lifetime on this planet. After all, with those two conditions in place, if one place becomes too unfree for my taste, I can move on.

"Wait a second!" some of you may find yourselves thinking indignantly.

What about the wholesale trampling of the US Constitution in recent decades? What about the militarization of the domestic police force here in the US? What about the loss of freedom in the Land of the Free?

I might respond with a sad shake of the head and by mouthing words such as "tragic," or "damn shame," or even "it's outrageous, criminal even." And there's no question it's all of those things and more. The idea of America in its youth was amazing, especially considering the era in which it was birthed. But that idea has been so diluted at this point to be almost meaningless... here in the United States.

And therein lies the importance of being able to travel freely. You see, unlike many, I refuse to define myself by the artificial borders that were determined solely by an accident of birth. Why should I?

Do I relate to the idea of America? Of course; what thinking person wouldn't? But during these philosophical Dark Ages for freedom in the United States, what practical purpose does clinging onto that idea serve?

To use an overused comparison, what practical purpose would it have served for the head of a Jewish family during Hitler's Germany to stand on a street corner handing out anti-Nazi pamphlets? The obvious answer is "none." It would have just resulted in the ultimate loss of liberty – his death and likely that of everyone he loved.

Personally, I look at the Americans and I see a people who have been very effectively brainwashed, or who simply have given in to the entirely human tendency to shuffle unquestioningly onto the path of least resistance and let themselves go.

I see a people who, on a wholesale basis, have consciously or unconsciously decided to trade the idea of America for the false security of a totalitarian state.

While there are voices in the woods, such as Ron Paul, that warn of the consequences, I'm trying to focus today on hard realities. And the hard reality is that if you were to assemble all 300 million US citizens in an auditorium to listen to well-presented arguments for less vs. more government and then ask for a show of hands, the vast majority would raise their hands in favor of the current system that has the state deeply involved in pretty much every aspect of the economy and society at large.

Skeptical? Then ask yourself what percentage of the audience would raise their hands in favor if asked the following:

"How many of you want Social Security to remain intact?"

"How many think the government should subsidize health care?"

"How many think the rich should pay more taxes?"

Or ask your questions in the negative, and watch how few hands stick in the air.

"How many of you think the Food and Drug Administration should be abolished?"

"How many of you think recreational drugs, including cocaine and heroin, should be legalized?"

"How many of you think the Department of Education should be shuttered?"

"How many of you think that the tax credit for mortgages should be canceled?"

At the end of the exercise, the level of support for the very same tangled body of state-controlled handouts, regulations and central economic planning now choking the last gasps of life out of the body politic would be obvious and overwhelming.

The practical point I am trying to make here is that the COL are fighting against a very entrenched and increasingly dangerous public mindset. Some like to hearken back to the days of the revolution when prominent men in the community risked it all to overthrow the British. I would contend that the situation today is totally different. Then it was a foreign enemy daily adding salt to the open wound of what was essentially an occupation by marching troops around and passing highly unpopular and often arbitrarily punitive laws. Today the enemy (of true freedom) is within. In fact, the nation is overrun by them... they dominate in most every community, in most businesses and even in most families.

And your fellow citizens don't want what the COL are selling. Sure, there are a fair number – for instance, members of the Tea Party – who might be sympathetic on a largely abstract level, but drill down into the specifics by asking questions such as those above and you'll quickly find just how far off the grid you are.

So what's the point?

1. **Face the facts – free no more.** Contrary to popular delusions, the United States is no longer the Land of the Free – either in terms of its judicial system or its market structure. Rather, it is the land of the paranoid, the state-dependent, supporters of Guantanamo and permawar... with the highest incarceration rates in the world, militarized police and... and... and... That said, it's also the land of the convenient shopping, relatively inexpensive food and housing and trains that run on time. Provided you pay attention not to trip over the big legal no-nos, you can enjoy a very high standard of living (though, in fairness, that's true of most of the world). If, on the other hand, you don't think you can stay out of trouble here or in any country whose government is becoming a danger to residents, then go somewhere else. Or, to quote my friend and partner Doug Casey, "Stop thinking like a serf."
2. **Define what it is you want from your life.** And I am speaking about this life, not some promised afterlife. Do you really want to put yourself on the front line of a battle that the vast majority of the populace wouldn't support you in? If the answer is "yes," that you are willing to lose your liberty – the ability to travel freely – in support of the cause, then I can only wish you well. I hope at the end of your life, which in the US could come quicker than you'd like, you'll have found satisfaction and purpose in the struggle. Just be sure you are clear on your objectives and are willing to accept the consequences.

Of course, I'll continue to support the champions of liberty here in the US, even though I think they are tilting against windmills for the most part. And I will almost certainly find occasion to speak against the totalitarian tide myself, albeit in terms sufficiently tame to avoid leading to a loss of my liberty.

Far more important, as it relates to my personal liberty, I'll continue the process of diversifying my life between political jurisdictions so that if and when things in my native country become unbearably oppressive – and therefore an active risk to my ability to freely go about my business – I can bid it goodbye.

Call me a coward, but in my view it's far better to switch than to fight, especially when the vast majority of my fellow citizens wouldn't know the true meaning of freedom if you served it to them on a silver plate.