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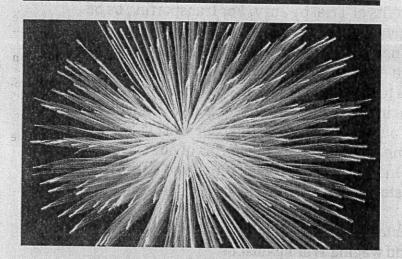
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INDEPENDENCE DAY

## The principles of July 4

The following was written by Roger Pilon, vice president for legal affairs at the Cato Institute and director of Cato's Center for Constitutional Studies, and published in National Review Online in 2004.

oday, we celebrate our nation's birth through a remarkable document: the Declaration of Independence. In that document, the founders set forth the reasons that impelled them to independence and, more important, the moral vision that has inspired us, and millions more around the world, ever since, Its

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spired us, and millions more around the world, ever since. Its essence is individual liberty, secured by limited government. Too often today, however, government is at war with liberty, telling us that it knows best, that it will decide for us.

When the founders spoke of liberty, they meant each of us has a right to plan and live his own life. That basic idea is captured nowhere more clearly than in Thomas Jefferson's magnificently simple phrase, "the pursuit of happiness."

That right, which is nothing less than the foundation of individual liberty, is key to understanding the Declaration's basic principle — and our modern problem. Happiness, after all, is an individual, subjective notion. What makes you happy is not necessarily what makes me happy. That's what makes life interesting. It would be a dull world if our tastes were all the same. In a free society, we have a right to practice whatever religion, pursue whatever job, and buy whatever product we wish, as long as we respect the rights of others in the process.

Yet the more we ask government to do for us, the more we undermine that vision. Every time government creates a new program "for our own good," it forces us all to a common vision of the good. Do you want the government to pay for your child's education? Here's the school you have to use and the curriculum your child must study. No thanks, you say; you'll send your child to a private school instead, where you have a choice of programs. You'll still have to pay for the public system.

In these and countless other ways, in the name of helping us, government throws us all in a common pot and decides for us. We "pursue happiness" not as individuals but collectively — through government. We've turned Jefferson's order on its head. Is it any wonder so many of us are "unhappy" with the programs we get, with the choices government makes for us? Imagine if government chose our national religious program. When government chooses everything, in-

dividuals choose nothing. Look at North Korea for the ex-

treme example of that.

The founders envisioned a world where individuals pursued happiness as individuals or as members of private, voluntary associations — families, businesses, churches, charities, and the like. That world — the civil society de Tocqueville spoke of — was where most of life was meant to be lived, with government limited primarily to securing the rights we have or we create in that world.

As we celebrate our independence today, let's keep in mind that we're celebrating our independence from overweening government — British or American.



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