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Freedom imperilled

On democratic despotism.

“It is seldom,” David Hume wrote, “that liberty of any kind is lost all at once.” That admonitory sentence furnishes one of the epigraphs for Friedrich Hayek’s *The Road to Serfdom*, first published in 1943. How is freedom faring in the United States today? Peter Robinson, a scholar at the Hoover Institution at Stanford, provided a melancholy précis in “The Loss of Individual Liberty,” a column that appeared in *Forbes* last month. Mr. Robinson recalled a dinner he shared with Milton Friedman several years ago. He complimented the venerable economist on his role in transforming the intellectual landscape, especially in fostering widespread appreciation of the inextricable connection between free markets and individual liberty. Friedman refused the compliment. “We may have won the intellectual battle,” he said, “but in practical politics, it’s difficult to see that we’ve had any effect at all.” Even a few years ago, it would have been easy to react as did Mr. Robinson at the time: to think that Friedman was responding with false modesty. After all, had not the power of the free market been demonstrated beyond cavil in America’s triumph over the Soviet Union, its unparalleled prosperity, its culture of political freedom?

That, as Mr. Robinson puts it, was then. Now, today, we have witnessed an expansion of government into every corner of economic and social life that has been as sudden as it has been extraordinary. Having just lived through a presidential election in which the winning candidate cheerfully admitted that his goal was “to spread the wealth around,” we might think Mr. Robinson, a well-known conservative, was making a partisan point. He wasn’t. Over the last several years, he observes, we have witnessed, under a Republican administration, a prescription drug program that “represents the biggest expansion of the welfare state since the Great Society.” At the same time, Congress sharply increased domestic spending and passed “the biggest farm bill in history, a massive transfer of resources to the 2 percent of the population still engaged in agriculture.”

That’s not all. In the campaign that just ended, the Republican candidate was an architect of legislation—the McCain-Feingold Act—that is perhaps the most serious challenge to political free speech in the United States in our lifetime. And what have we to look forward to? Mr. Robinson reminds us that the President-elect has plans to federalize health insurance, a preliminary move

toward the nationalization of health care, an industry that accounts for some 17 percent of the country's gross domestic product. And let's not forget the promised "tax credits," i.e., direct cash payments from the Federal government that would, as Daniel Henninger noted in *The Wall Street Journal*, "place some 48 percent of Americans ... out of the income tax system." Were this to happen, Mr. Robinson notes, it would "fundamentally alter the nature of citizenship itself. Almost half of all Americans would, in effect, have been made the recipients of a vast new entitlement. As that proportion grows, the nation would approach a tipping point."

Some years ago, the literary critic Paul Fussell began an essay by recalling an advertising slogan for Teacher's Scotch. "In life, experience is the great teacher. In Scotch, Teacher's is the great experience." Clever, but we wonder whether the first sentence is true. *Is* experience the great teacher? The thing to bear in mind, Mr. Robinson suggests, is that

All that the nation's founders understood two centuries ago about the imperative of limited government, all that we learned from the long struggle between collectivism and free markets during our own time—all this could soon simply evanesce.

We are being asked to unlearn what we know, to surrender the virtues that can only be acquired in conditions of freedom, and to become a lesser people than we are. The land of the free and the home of the brave could soon be transformed into the land of the dependent and the home of the infantilized.

Tocqueville famously warned about that infantilization in the celebrated paragraphs about "democratic despotism" in *Democracy in America*, that "tutelary" despotism which "extends its arms over society as a whole [and] covers its surface with a network of small, complicated, painstaking, uniform rules through which the most original minds and the most vigorous souls cannot clear a way to surpass the crowd." As our masters in Washington debate over which industries are to be the recipients of the taxpayers' largesse, it is worth remembering Tocqueville's warning with Friedrich Hayek's admonition that "Economic control is not merely control of a sector of human life which can be separated from the rest; it is the control of the means for all our ends. And whoever has sole control of the means must also determine which ends are to be served, which values are to be rated higher and which lower—in short, what men should believe and strive for." It is a commonplace to observe that freedom is difficult to achieve but easy, oh-so-easy, to lose. As Hume saw, it is generally not lost all at once, but step by step: government program by government program, regulation by regulation, entitlement by entitlement, until finally, as Tocqueville put it, we find ourselves "nothing more than a herd of timid and industrious animals of which the government is the shepherd."

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