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Fear

On the desire for freedom.

George W. Bush once observed that “the desire for freedom resides in every human heart.” That sure sounds nice. Is it true? We think the jury is still out on that. At the very least, we’d suggest that there are other less-noble-sounding desires competing for a place. One of these is the desire for servitude and conformity. In *The Spirit of the Laws*, Montesquieu said that “government should be set up so that no man need be afraid of another.” Montesquieu, together with John Locke, was one of the most important influences on the political philosophy of the Founding Fathers. But we’ve come a long way since Madison and Hamilton limned the ideals of a limited government of enumerated powers that put a premium on individual liberty. The American-born English novelist Lionel Shriver helped measure the distance traveled in an essay for *City Journal* on the progress of covid hysteria in squelching freedom, not just in the actions of an overbearing state but also, and perhaps more crucially, in the growing habit of subservience in the population at large.

Shriver focuses on the situation in Britain, but what she says has equal pertinence to what is unfolding in the United States and elsewhere. A good 27 percent of Britons, she reports, “want to impose a government-mandated nationwide curfew of 10 p.m. . . . ‘until the pandemic was under control worldwide,’ which might be years from now.” More sobering, nearly 20 percent would impose such a curfew permanently, regardless of the risk of covid. Even more extraordinary, 64 percent want Britain to mandate masks in shops and on public transport for the duration of the pandemic, while “an astounding 51 percent want to be masked by law, forever.”

What these depressing numbers tell us, Shriver rightly observes, is that “far from yearning for their historic liberties as ‘free-born Englishmen,’ ” some eight out of ten Britons are “‘anxious’ about lifting any of their government’s copious pandemic restrictions.” Many even appear “in love . . . with the state of captivity itself.” The same, alas, goes for a sizable part of the American population. Madison and Hamilton and the other Founding Fathers labored mightily to

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produce a form of government that supported liberty. But what if “we the people” decide that liberty is too scary, too difficult, too troublesome to maintain? What then?

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