Say "No" to Intolerance

by Milton Friedman

When Prof. Friedman gave this talk at the 1990 Future of Freedom Conference, he was introduced as one of the three "great libertarians" of this century. An appropriate introduction, for his subject was the two *other* "great libertarians."

Thank you very much. I'm embarrassed by that introduction and by your welcoming of me, because I'm afraid that you might not be quite so enthusiastic at the end of the talk. The virtue of being among people with whom you agree fundamentally is that you can talk about some of the harder issues, which you don't want to talk about in other circles. I want tonight to talk about basic libertarian beliefs and values. (I refer to myself as a liberal in the true meaning of that term: a believer in freedom. Unfortunately, we've had to use the word "libertarian" because, as Schumpeter said, "As a supreme if unintended compliment, the enemies of the system of private enterprise have thought it wise to appropriate its label.") As a long-time liberal-libertarian, I am puzzled by a paradox. On the one hand, I regard the basic human value that underlies my own beliefs as tolerance, based on humility. I have no right to coerce someone else, because I cannot be sure that I am right and he is wrong. On the other hand—and this is the paradox—some of our heroes, people who have done the most to promote libertarian ideas, have been highly intolerant as human beings, and have justified their views (with which I largely agree) in ways that I regard as promoting intolerance. Equally important, as I have observed the libertarian movement, there's a related strand of utopianism in the libertarian movement that I believe is also productive of intolerance and is fundamentally inconsistent with the basic values that I believe we stand for.

Why do I regard tolerance as the foundation of my belief in freedom? How do we justify not initiating coercion? If I asked you what is the basic philosophy of a libertarian, I believe that most of you would say that a libertarian philosophy is based on the premise that you should not initiate force, that you may not initiate coercion. Why not?

If we see someone doing something wrong, someone starting to sin (to use a theological term) let alone just make a simple mistake, how do we justify not initiating coercion? Are we not sinning if we don't stop him? Only two bases for a negative answer occur to me that make any sense. One—which I regard largely as largely an evasion—is that there's no virtue in his not sinning if he's not free to sin. That may be true. But then, that doesn't apply to me. It may be no virtue for him. That doesn't mean I should let him sin: am I not sinning when I let him sin? How do I justify letting him sin? I believe that the more persuasive answer is, can I be sure he's sinning? Can I be sure that I am right and he is wrong? That I know what sin is?

This is a complicated and difficult problem. Let me give an extreme example. I am on Golden Gate Bridge and I see someone getting ready to jump. He's going to commit suicide. Am I entitled to use physical coercion to stop him, assuming that I am capable of doing so? On the libertarian basis of not initiating coercion, one would have to say no. Yet I am sure that most of you, like me, would stop him if we could. We'd grab him. We'd justify that temporarily by saying "He doesn't really intend to do that and it's irreversible and we've got to stop him from doing something irreversible."

We grab him. We hold on to him. And he gives a perfectly plausible reason why he wants to commit suicide. Are you going to let him go? In principle you should say yes. In practice, I doubt very much that many of us, assuming that we had the power to hold him, would just let him go.

What this demonstrates, fundamentally, is that no simple principle is really adequate. We do not have all the answers, and there is no simple formula that will give us all the answers. That's why humility, tolerance, is so basic, so fundamental. Because the

only way that we can get a little closer to those fundamental principles is by being tolerant, by considering and respecting the opinions of people who disagree with us.

And yet, as I've already said, how can we square that with the intolerance demonstrated by people who deservedly are heroes to libertarians? There is no doubt in my mind that Ludwig von Mises has done more to spread the fundamental ideas of free markets than

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any other individual. There is no doubt in my mind that nobody has done more than Ayn Rand to develop a popular following for many of these ideas. And yet there is also no doubt that both of them were extremely intolerant.

I recall a personal episode, at the first meeting of the Mont Pelerin Society—the founding meeting in 1947 in Mont Pelerin, Switzerland. Ludwig von Mises was one of the people who was there. I was also. The group had a series of discussions on different topics. One afternoon, the discussion was on the distribution of income, taxes, progressive taxes, and so on. The people in that room included Friedrich von Hayek, Fritz Machlup, George Stigler, Frank Knight, Henry Hazlitt, John Jewkes, Lionel Robbins, Leonard Read—hardly a group whom you would regard as leftists. In the middle of that discussion von Mises got up and said "You're all a bunch of socialists," and stomped out of the room.

You need only read Barbara Branden's *The Passion of Ayn Rand*, a fascinating book, to recognize that what I've said applies to Rand as well. Barbara Branden tells a story that refers to both Rand and von Mises: "One evening, the Hazlitts [that was Henry Hazlitt, whom I mentioned] invited Ayn and Frank to dinner with Dr and Mrs von Mises. The evening was a disaster. It was the first time Ayn had dis-

cussed moral philosophy in depth with either of the two men. 'My impression,' she was to say, 'was that von Mises did not care to consider moral issues, and Henry was seriously committed to altruism. . . . We argued quite violently. At one point von Mises lost his patience and screamed at me. We did not part enemies—except for von Mises at the moment; about a year later he and I met at a conservative dinner and his wife made peace between us.'"

The important thing to me is less their intolerance in personal behavior than the philosophical doctrines on which they claimed to base their views, which seem to me to be fundamentally a source of intellectual intolerance. So far as von Mises is concerned, I refer to his methodological doctrine of praxeology. That's a fancy word and it may seem highly irrelevant to my topic, but it isn't at all. Because his fundamental idea was that we knew things about "human action" (the title of his famous book) because we are human beings. As a result, he argued, we have absolutely certain knowledge of the motivations of human action and he maintained that we can derive substantive conclusions from that basic knowledge. Facts, statistical or other evidence cannot, he argued, be used to test those conclusions, but only to illustrate a theory. They cannot be used to contradict a theory, because we are not generalizing from observed evidence, but from innate knowledge of human motives and behavior.

That philosophy converts an asserted body of substantive conclusions into a religion. They do not constitute a set of scientific propositions that you can argue about in terms of empirical evidence. Suppose two people who share von Mises' praxeological view come to contradictory conclusions about anything. How can they reconcile their difference? The only way they can do so is by a purely logical argument. One has to say to the other, "You made a mistake in reasoning." And the other has to say, "No, you made a mistake in reasoning." Suppose neither believes he has made a mistake in reasoning. There's only one thing left to do: fight. Karl Popper—another Austrian, like Mises and Hayek—takes a different approach. If we disagree, we can say to one another, "You tell me what facts, if

they were observed, you would regard as sufficient to contradict your view." And vice versa. Then we can go out and see which, if either, conclusion the evidence contradicts. The virtue of this modern scientific approach, as proposed by Popper, is that it provides a way in which, at least in principle, we can resolve disagreements without a conflict.

So much for von Mises. That's a very brief statement and I recognize that it doesn't do justice to either praxeology or Popper. But that's not relevant here.

The same thing is true of Ayn Rand, as her phrase about Hazlitt's supposed commitment to altruism suggests. Rand did not regard facts as relevant, as ways of testing her propositions. She derived everything from the basic proposition that A=A. And from that follows everything. But if it does, again, suppose two Objectivists, two disciples of Ayn Rand, disagree, or that a disciple disagrees with her. Both agree that A is A. There's no disagreement about that. But for one reason or another they have different views on another subject. How do they reconcile that difference? There is no way. And that's the basic reason for the stories that Barbara Branden tells in *The Passion of Ayn Rand* about what happened when people disagreed in any minute detail with Ayn Rand.

I believe that there's an enormous paradox there. But don't misunderstand me. Nothing I say lessens my admiration in any way for the role that both von Mises and Rand played in promoting the ideas of liberty and free markets. And yet I believe that they teach both a positive and a negative lesson. The negative lesson is that we must beware of intolerance if we're going to be really effective in persuading people. The writings of both Rand and Mises—and much libertarian literature—take for granted that hard questions have easy answers, that it's possible to know something about the real world, to derive substantive conclusions, from purely *a priori* principles.

Let me take a real example. How many times have you heard someone say that the answer to a problem is that you simply have to make it private property. But is private property such an obvious notion? Does it come out of the soul?

I have a house. It belongs to me. You fly an airplane over my house, 20,000 feet up. Are you violating my private property? You fly over at 50 feet. You might give a different answer. Your house is next door. You have a hi-fi system. You play your hi-fi at an enormously high decibel count. Are you violating my private property? Those are questions to which you can't get answers by introspection or asking whether A is A or not. They are practical questions that require an-

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swers based on experience. Before there were airplanes, nobody thought of the problem of trespass through air. So simply saying "private property" is a mantra, not an answer. Simply saying "use the market" is not an answer.

Let me give you two recent examples that also are relevant to the same theme—utopianism. I'll touch on them very briefly: vouchers and negative income tax. Re vouchers—and I'm now speaking of schooling vouchers— schooling is, next only to national defense, the largest socialist enterprise in the United States. And it is clearly as much of a failure as the socialist enterprises in Poland or Hungary or Czechoslovakia or East Germany. It shares the characteristic features of those failures. The characteristic feature of socialist failure is that you have a group, the *nomenklatura*, who do very well, you have masses who do very poorly, and the system as a whole is highly inefficient. That's exactly the case with our school system. Those of us who happen to live in high-income suburbs, as well as high-paid teachers and teacher-administrators, do very well out of the system. The poor suckers who live in the ghetto or who don't have any money, they do very poorly out of the system. The system as a whole takes two or three times as

much resources to operate as are necessary, and it doesn't do a good job when it does. So it's clearly a failure.

In the Future of Freedom Foundation's *Freedom Daily*, for September 1990—again, a group that is doing good work and is making an impact—Jacob Hornberger wrote, "What is the answer to socialism in public schools? Freedom." Correct. But how do we get from here to there? Is that somebody else's problem? Is that a purely practical problem that we can dismiss? The ultimate goal we would like to get to is a society in which people are responsible for themselves and for their children's schooling. And in which you do not have a governmental system. But am I a statist, as I have been labelled by a number of libertarians, because some thirty years ago I suggested the use of educational vouchers as a way of easing the transition? Is that, and I quote Hornberger again, "simply a futile attempt to make socialism work more efficiently"? I don't believe it. I don't believe that you can simply say what the ideal is. This is what I mean by the utopian strand in libertarianism. You cannot simply describe the utopian solution, and leave it to somebody else how we get from here to there. That's not only a practical problem. It's a problem of the responsibilities that we have.

The same issue arises with respect to welfare, social security and the rest. It may be that the ideal is—and I believe that it is—to have a society in which you do not have any kind of major or substantial governmental system of welfare. Again, nearly thirty years ago I suggested, as a way of promoting a transition from here to there, a negative income tax as a substitute for and alternative to the present rag bag of welfare and redistributionist measures. Again, is that a statist solution? I believe not. We have participated in a society in which people have become dependent on government hand-outs. It is irresponsible, immoral I would say, simply to say, "Oh well, somehow or other we'll overnight drop the whole thing." You have to have some mechanism of going from here to there. I believe that we lose a lot of plausibility for our ideas by not

facing up to that responsibility.

It is of course desirable to have a vision of the ideal, of Utopia. Far be it from me to denigrate that. But we can't stop there. If we do, we become a cult or a religion, and not a living, vital force. These comments apply, I believe, to the largest socialist enterprise in the U.S. as well. That is, of course, national defense. Like everyone else in this room, I am appalled by the waste of the defense industry. I am sure that if you and I could only run it, we could do it for half the money, and do it a lot better. But although I have tried for many years to figure out a way in which we could run defense as a private enterprise, and despite the hopes of some anarchist libertarians like my son, that we can, I have to admit that after some 30 years now, he's never been able to persuade me that we could. I suppose that just shows how intolerant I am. At any rate, simple slogans like "The market will take care of it" or "noninterventionism" do not resolve the hard problems. We may very well agree on the direction we want to go in, but just how we're going to go there and how far we're going to go, that's a much more difficult problem.

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Let me close by noting that admirers of von Mises seldom quote the following of his statements: "Government as such is not only not an evil but the most necessary and beneficial institution, as without it no lasting cooperation and no civilization could be developed and preserved." Now that's an idea to chew over. Thank you very much. □

The foregoing is an edited transcript of a talk given to the International Society for Individual Liberty in August, 1990.