



# INDIVISIBLE

**Social and Economic Foundations of American Liberty**

Leading Conservatives  
Exchange Policy Perspectives



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**INTRODUCTION BY JAY W. RICHARDS**



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# CULTURE

## A Culture of Responsibility

BY EDWIN J. FEULNER, PH.D.



Edwin J. Feulner

“CULTURE” CAN REFER TO MANY THINGS, FROM BALLET to opera, museums to memorials, book clubs to fraternal societies. Wikipedia’s entry on the topic runs more than 40 printed pages. But for those of us working to advance freedom, our primary concern must be how culture forms individuals who guard and exercise their freedom. A culture that inculcates responsibility is especially vital to any sustainable experiment in liberty.

Our culture rests on the twin pillars of liberty and responsibility. They are inseparable, observes F. A. Hayek in his 1960 book *The Constitution of Liberty*:

A free society probably demands more than any other that people be guided in their action by a sense of responsibility which extends beyond the duties exacted by the law.... When men are allowed to act as they see fit, they must also be held responsible for the results of their efforts.<sup>38</sup>

Professor Hayek further explains that, while responsibility has come to be regarded primarily as a legal concept, “it is, of course, no less a moral concept, a conception which underlies our view of a person’s moral duties. Our whole attitude toward the working of our social order...is closely tied up with our views about responsibility.”<sup>39</sup> This “working of our social order” and duties beyond those “exacted by the law” are what we might call *culture*.

Culture takes its shape from the character of each of us as individuals and the character of our interactions with one another in community. As Hayek’s comments reveal, culture and political order go hand in hand. A free economy and limited government cannot exist apart from a culture of responsibility.

A culture of responsibility is the safeguard that prevents liberty from degenerating into license. It is made up of citizens who possess what the American Founders called “republican virtue”—character traits such as honesty, kindness, trustworthiness, respect for law, fairness, self-discipline, and self-reliance.

Because a culture of responsibility prizes individuals of strong and noble character, it also encourages the institutions that best model and nurture good

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38 F. A. Hayek, *The Constitution of Liberty* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), p. 76. Excerpted in “Responsibility and Freedom,” in Edwin J. Feulner, ed., *The March of Freedom: Modern Classics in Conservative Thought* (Heritage Books 2003), p. 72.

39 *Ibid.*

character. These character-building institutions include families, religious congregations, schools, neighborhoods, business associations, trade unions, civic and service clubs, Boy Scouts, and Little Leagues.

These “little platoons,” as Edmund Burke called them, introduce the individual—and particularly the young—to the values

*A free economy and limited government cannot exist apart from a culture of responsibility.*

and ideals of our larger society. They are entrusted with passing the culture of responsibility down through the generations.

#### AN AGE OF IRRESPONSIBILITY

Sadly, the culture of responsibility has not fared well in recent years. We’ve witnessed a coarsening of public life, a loss of respect for good character and personal virtue, and a loss of shame for actions that once brought disrepute. Human nature has never been perfect. But the “better angels of our nature,” to borrow Abraham Lincoln’s phrase, call us to acknowledge ideal virtues, even if those virtues represent standards that we can never perfectly attain.

Rather than striving to reach those standards, however, some say that we should lower them to a more “realistic” level—or abandon them altogether. For example, some say it’s unrealistic to expect young people to maintain a standard of abstinence until marriage, given that, after all, not all young people will live up to that ideal. But no one is hurt more by such lowering of cultural expectations than young people themselves—or the children brought into the world as the result of their decisions. Fatherlessness has become a problem of extraordinary proportions in America: today, nearly four out of 10 children are born to unwed mothers. Among black children, that figure is a staggering seven out of 10.

Those statistics will have a profound effect on the lives of millions of children as well as on our culture in general. Children born outside of marriage will have a much more difficult time getting ahead in life educationally and economically. They’re more likely to end up dependent on welfare or in prison. And they’re more likely to repeat the cycle of out-of-wedlock childbearing when they reach adulthood.

It is a vicious circle. As dependence on the welfare state grows, the welfare state, in turn, erodes freedom and responsibility. As Hayek describes in *The Road to Serfdom*, the welfare state poses a serious threat to individual character. He warns that the “most important change which extensive government control produces is a psychological change, an alteration in the character of the people.”<sup>40</sup> That gradual, almost imperceptible, character change can have enormous consequences. Among

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40 F. A. Hayek, *The Road to Serfdom* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

Quoted in “Seven Principles of a Free Society,” Presidential Address by Edwin J. Feulner, Jr., to the 1997 Regional Meeting of the Mont Pelerin Society, in *Intellectual Pilgrims: The Fiftieth Anniversary of the Mont Pelerin Society* (1999), p. 38.

recipients of government largesse, the culture of responsibility can easily succumb to an entitlement mentality. For those around them, the welfare state encourages an unhealthy individualism that shrugs off the responsibility to be our brother's keeper and cedes the care for the needs of our neighbors to distant bureaucrats.

An ever-encroaching state also erodes the institutions of family, church, and community, usurping many of the roles they played in prior generations. Pushed to the margins of public life, their character-shaping influence is diminished while that of the state is increased. Public schools hostile to religious expression and public assistance programs that reward idleness influence character in their own way—bending it away from respect for the transcendent and from an individual's responsibility for his personal actions.

Just as social welfare policy can erode a culture of responsibility, so can economic policy. Our economic system provides us freedom to make many decisions that involve a degree of risk. Risk means that the outcomes may be unfavorable. If we accept the freedom to make decisions involving various risks, however, then we must also accept the companion responsibility when events turn against us and we suffer loss.

Individuals, institutions, and policymakers have made many poor decisions leading up to the market failures that we have recently witnessed. Now, government is heavily involved in trying to resolve those failures and restore the economy to growth. The dangers of heavy government involvement in these processes become

*If we seek freedom, let it begin with each of us modeling self-government in our own lives.*

more apparent every day. One of the most serious concerns is that when government seeks to protect individuals from the bad consequences of their decisions, it eliminates a vital discipline underlying our

economic system. As economist Allan Meltzer commented: "Capitalism without failure is like religion without sin."

When government erases the negative consequences of our decisions, it absolves us of responsibility for our decisions. This distorts all economic processes. For instance, when the government repeatedly steps in to bail out faltering sectors of our economy, it only further disengages freedom from responsibility. What does it communicate, for example, to the 96 percent of Americans who do pay their mortgage on time when the government rescues those who don't?

## RECOVERING A CULTURE OF RESPONSIBILITY

Failing to uphold standards of responsibility endangers the legacy of liberty. The good news is that we can restore a culture of responsibility. It is a matter of choice. It begins with the choices each of us makes in our individual lives and extends to the choices we make about our standards for society, whether exerted by the "little platoons" or enacted in law. Specifically, we can:

1. **Model the responsibility of self-government in our own lives.** Whether student, spouse, stockbroker, or statesman, each of us has a duty to carry out our daily tasks with a sense of moral responsibility for our actions. Our personal, private actions shape the character of our culture, which, in turn, shapes the character of our political and economic order. If we seek freedom, let it begin with each of us modeling self-government in our own lives.
2. **Pursue policy that respects personal responsibility, character-forming institutions, and first principles.** As Jack Kemp often reminded us, when you tax something you get less of it, and when you reward something you get more of it. Welfare reform showed the power of changing the incentive structure in policy. After decades of telling single mothers they could continue to get a welfare check as long as they didn't get a job and didn't get married, the historic welfare reform act of 1996 required recipients to look for work. It also began to promote marriage. The success was dramatic: Welfare rolls were cut in half and black child poverty dropped to its lowest level in U.S. history.

As we pursue reform in other policy areas, we would do well to seek policies that conform to America's first principles. Our Founders understood that freedom and responsibility are inseparable. They created a Constitution that established a strong foundation of principles, respecting the dignity of a free and responsible people to apply those principles in their daily lives without dictating to them. In so doing, the Founders created the conditions that have allowed America to cope with change by balancing the best of tradition with the best of progress—in contrast to the revolutionary and central-planning spasms that have wracked other nations. These conditions have inspired many an entrepreneur, philanthropist, and charity worker in the course of American history—individuals who see beyond the status quo to a future that better realizes human potential.

3. **Explain the full benefits of freedom and responsibility.** The combination of freedom and responsibility yields economic as well as moral benefits. Our political and economic order is materially as well as morally attractive. Some statist and centralizers have caricatured capitalism as selfish individualism, but the historical record proves otherwise. A market-based economy depends on virtues and values that stabilize

and harmonize a multitude of competing interests in society. Hayek described how he fell in love with the Greek word for “to exchange” (*katallattein*) when he learned that it also meant “to admit into the community” and “to change from enemy to friend.”<sup>41</sup> The true purpose of free exchange, we must always remember, is to make friends of our enemies.

#### THE TASK BEFORE US

We have important work to do in restoring a culture of freedom, a work that will require broad engagement. As I told a gathering of the Mont Pelerin Society in 1997, “We must reach beyond the economic realm to the historians and political philosophers ... and to businessmen, artists, and the religious to build the ‘critical intellectual mass’ to address these questions creatively and constructively and move toward Hayek’s goal of articulating a comprehensive ‘philosophy of freedom.’”<sup>42</sup>

That philosophy of freedom envisions a society firmly based on the “little platoons” of family, school, church, and neighborhood rather than the “nanny state.” It will be a genuinely compassionate society in which people look after

*A market-based economy depends on virtues and values that stabilize and harmonize a multitude of competing interests in society.*

the welfare of the neediest members of their community because they recognize a moral obligation to do so—and not because the state forces them to pay for social programs that end up doing more harm than good. Above all, it will be a

society that recognizes that our most precious resource is the human spirit, and that a spirit of creativity and enterprise can flourish only in a climate of freedom.

Contemplating the current state of our culture can invite despair and convince us that we’re on an inevitable downward spiral, that things will only, always, get worse. To ward off such pessimism, I take inspiration, as have so many others, from the late Pope John Paul II, a man who experienced the totalitarian suppression of virtue and human dignity for many years—and a man whose indefatigable spirit played such a large role in restoring a culture of responsibility in his lifetime. This was his charge to us:

We must not be afraid of the future. We must not be afraid of man. It is no accident that we are here. Each and every human person has been created in the “image and likeness” of the One who is the origin of all that is. We have within us the capacities

41 F.A. Hayek, *Law, Legislation, and Liberty: The Mirage of Social Justice*, Vol. 2 (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul PLC, 1976), pp. 108–109.

42 Edwin J. Feulner, Jr., “We Are All Liberals Now—Or Are We?” Presidential Address to the 1997 Special Gathering of the Mont Pelerin Society, in *Intellectual Pilgrims*, p. 23.

for wisdom and virtue. With these gifts, and with the help of God's grace, we can build in the next century and the next millennium a civilization worthy of the human person, a true culture of freedom. We can and must do so!<sup>43</sup>

*Edwin J. Feulner, Ph.D., is president of The Heritage Foundation.*

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43 Pope John Paul II, "The Moral Structure of Freedom," Address to the United Nations, October 5, 1995, at [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_paul\\_ii/speeches/1995/october/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_spe\\_05101995\\_address-to-uno\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/speeches/1995/october/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_05101995_address-to-uno_en.html) (accessed August 13, 2009).

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