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PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

The Moral Case for Liberty

When you make the case for liberty, is it on moral grounds?

It's a moral imperative that every human be the owner and steward of his or her own life. This is only true under a system of liberty.

It's unjust for the government to exercise coercion that takes our property, tells us what to do, or tells us how to live. Liberty frees us from this.

And it's wrong to erect barriers to human flourishing, which are obstacles to our ability to live prosperous and meaningful lives in a world at peace. It's liberty that provides the conditions for such flourishing.

I recall a stirring toast to liberty that Cato senior fellow Johan Norberg delivered a few years ago at the Atlas Network's annual Freedom Dinner. Near the end he raised his glass and exclaimed, "Liberty . . . is . . . AWESOME!" And it is. Liberty is a powerful one-two punch that is morally superior to its alternatives *and* delivers the best practical outcomes.

Time and again we fail to advocate or defend liberty on a moral basis. In the policy arena, we tend to focus on and debate practical outcomes and results. But it's a big mistake to leave it at that. For even an airtight case that government intervention produces suboptimal results will be rebuffed by "evidence" to the contrary.

And we often make an even bigger mistake: responding to moral arguments with practical ones. Advocates for state action often couch their assertions in moral terms, such as helping the poor. Should our response be to cede the moral high ground and simply argue that government intervention impedes growth, distorts markets and incentives, and leaves us all—including those the policies claim to help—worse off?

It's far better for practical reasoning to be buttressed by a strong defense of our moral position. For policies aimed at the poor, there's a moral case that in a free society it's simply wrong to take property from one group of people and give it to another group. And it's reprehensible from a moral standpoint to implement policies that hurt those they are intended to help—which such policies so often do.

Consider the push for higher taxes on the rich—including wealth taxes—coursing through the Democratic presidential candidate nomination process. The rationale being used is the idea that wealth inequality has increased dramatically in recent times, an idea that

Ryan Bourne and Chris Edwards demolish in their paper "Exploring Wealth Inequality," which was published in November.

There are two lessons in this battle. First, high-quality research—a hallmark of Cato—plays an essential role in thwarting government intervention and in defending liberty. Chris and Ryan aptly demonstrate that studies showing large increases in wealth inequality—particularly those produced by French economists Thomas Piketty, Emmanuel Saez, and Gabriel Zucman—are based on dubious assumptions and incomplete and inadequate data. Chris calls this the "French Reign of Error" because it is solidly rebuffed by more-compelling research, which suggests inequality has increased modestly, if at all.

The second lesson is that convincing analysis isn't enough. Since social "science" isn't science at all, on any issue we'll confront research purporting to disprove our point of view. And partisanship, confirmation bias, and intellectual laziness ensure that elites in media, government, and academia aren't going to kick the tires too hard on research that confirms their point of view or serves their political ends.

The case for the practical outcomes produced by freedom is a powerful one. But not as powerful as the moral case for liberty. Yes, wealth taxes would be a catastrophe for America. But they're also immoral. In a reputedly free society, government confiscation of property is repugnant—and wrong. And policies that single out 0.0005 percent of the population for punitive treatment are unjust.

By the way, even if income and wealth inequality have increased only modestly, let's attack them on moral grounds as well. We can do this by taking on government policies—such as regressive regulation, failing government schools, and a broken criminal justice system—that exacerbate inequality by placing immoral and unjust burdens on society's least fortunate.

On issue after issue after issue, libertarians hold the moral high ground. In making the case for liberty, don't concede that fact. Exploit it.

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