



BY PETER GOETTLER

“Cato is pushing more resources into defending the free economy.”

PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

# Protecting Prosperity's Engine

When I joined Cato, many were claiming we were on the cusp of a “libertarian moment.” Now, five years later, the environment seems distinctly un-libertarian.

Who would have thought it possible that Democrats could move even further away from free market ideas than they already were? Could anyone have guessed many Republicans would come to blame markets for leaving working-class Americans behind, and that they would begin flirting with long-discredited ideas such as protectionism, industrial policy, and central planning?

Against this backdrop, free markets have been disparaged from both sides of the spectrum as “libertarian economics.” A natural impulse is to say, “Hold on a minute! The mixed economy in which we live isn’t any libertarian’s conception of ‘free markets.’” Yes, we’ve got markets, but they’re heavily distorted with government interventions. And key sectors of the economy such as education and health care are dominated by government. But is this the best response for advocates of free markets? I don’t think so.

Socialists have long argued that, sure, communism hasn’t worked, but that’s only because it hasn’t really been tried or properly implemented. It is ironic—and misguided—if free marketers sing a similar tune. There’s a better response to attacks on free markets and looming threats to capitalism from left and right. First, take credit. Next, man the barricades.

Yes, we’re not living in the free and open society we’re working toward, and we’d be much better off if we were. Without so much government meddling in the economy, the sky might indeed be the limit. But as David Boaz points out in the May–June issue of *Cato Policy Report*, libertarians have indeed designed the basic operating system—rule of law, self-government, markets, voluntary exchange—on which the world runs today. And the results have been breathtaking.

Cato has done an exceptional job showing that those who contend free enterprise and markets don’t work are simply wrong, not just in theory but by empirical evidence. Through HumanProgress.org, *Ten Global Trends Every Smart Person Should Know* (by Reason’s Ron Bailey and Cato’s Marian Tupy), *Progress: Ten Reasons to Look Forward to the Future* and *In Defense of Global Capitalism* (by senior fellow Johan Norberg),

*The Improving State of the World* (by Indur Goklany), *Poverty and Progress* (by late senior fellow Deepak Lal), and more—including a mountain of multimedia work—we’ve told the story of the prosperity and human flourishing ushered in by liberty, limited government, and markets.

It’s a blessing when flourishing and prosperity become ubiquitous, but it lets us take progress for granted. So it’s essential to find new ways of communicating the story, like how Marian Tupy and Gale Pooley have shown that people need to work an ever-shorter time to be able to afford the things they need and want.

Furthermore, capitalism is taking shots these days for difficulties created not by free markets, but by policy mistakes on the part of government. Whether it’s the high cost of health care, challenges escaping from poverty or adjusting to the forces of globalization, lack of educational achievement, or a host of other issues, there’s a compelling case the fault lies with politics and policy rather than free enterprise. But that shouldn’t obscure the reality that markets, by and large, are working as promised and delivering astonishing results for human well-being.

As for manning the barricades, Cato is pushing more resources and strategy into defending the free economy. Scott Lincicome has joined to augment these efforts. Ryan Bourne has written an outstanding book teaching a wide range of economics lessons through the lens of the pandemic. Chris Edwards continues to anchor Cato’s unwavering efforts to rein in runaway government spending. Michael Cannon is laying plans to go on the offense against the government-dominated health care system. And Michael Tanner continues to show how misguided policies in areas as diverse as criminal justice, anti-poverty, education, drugs, and regulation conspire to make it so much more difficult for fellow citizens to escape poverty.

Yes, libertarian economics engenders wealth, cooperation, achievement, flourishing, and peace. It has produced a world that is better—by leaps and bounds—than at any previous time in human history. We should be happy to take credit for that.