

An Echo of Freedom: Lessons from an 18th-Century Call to Action

By Paul Meany

Amid rising challenges to liberal values, the enduring lessons of *Cato's Letters* forge the path for safeguarding individual liberties.

With the pandemic and subsequent lockdowns, the rise of populism, illiberalism on the left and right, and wars in Ukraine and Israel, it is easy to see why advocates of freedom across the globe are collectively biting their nails as the fate of liberalism worsens.

Freedom is a complex idea to advocate for and defend. It demands firm moral standards to treat every individual as a sovereign capable of making decisions and choosing what kind of life they wish to live. It can leave many unsatisfied. Unlike other ideologies, those that value freedom give no special favors to any particular group, making it seem cold or, at times, too rational. But freedom has no favorites. It is the birthright of all.

Classical liberals and libertarians bear the unique burden and circumstances to advocate such a universal ideal that is widely under attack. In such dire circumstances, how do we best defend freedom?

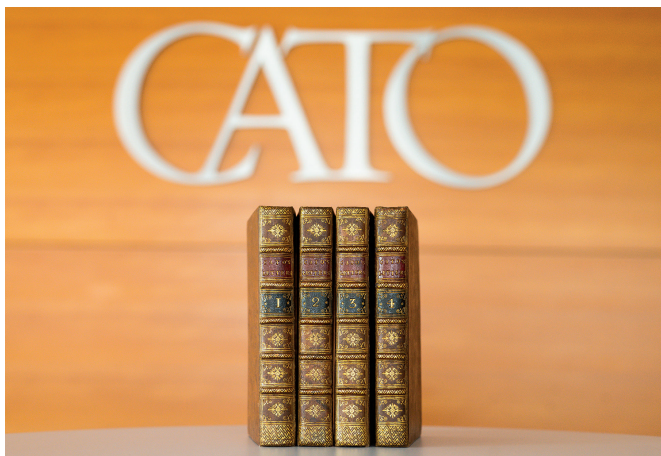
I believe the answer lies in the namesake of the Cato Institute, *Cato's Letters*, a collection of essays from 18th-century

England written by John Trenchard and Thomas Gordon.

The duo began writing their letters after the South Sea Bubble of 1720. In an 18th-century experiment in crony capitalism, the British state colluded with the South Sea Company to manipulate stock prices for their own gain. When the bubble burst, and the scandal was uncovered, it caused shock and outrage that the highest representatives in government betrayed the public trust in such a conniving manner.

In response, Trenchard and Gordon started writing *Cato's Letters*, publishing essays weekly with the *London Journal*. Trenchard and Gordon did not lament private industry and the market's influence but instead pinned the blame on the state stepping outside its bounds for the sake of profiteering. They believed it was their duty to advocate bringing the conspirators to justice and to outline the principles of a free society long after the scandal had subsided.

Writing as "Cato," Trenchard and Gordon synthesized the philosophies of Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and Niccolo



Machiavelli. An odd trio, but in the process, Trenchard and Gordon expounded a novel theory of libertarian civic virtue, the necessary attitudes and habits to maintain a free society.

Drawing from Hobbes, they believed that humans are creatures of passion and that our psyches are fundamentally selfish. According to Cato, “Every man loves himself better than he loves his whole species.” Lectures on religion and morality cannot change humanity’s fundamental selfishness. We must direct selfishness toward laudable goals.

Applying their pessimism to the political sphere, Trenchard and Gordon argued that “virtue” was a word that did not belong in politics because so few are capable of its practice. Boundless political power makes men into monsters. Writing under “Cato,” they stated that arbitrary power in a few individuals had killed more than every natural disaster in human history.

We should be wary of those who govern us, as Locke argued. Political power, especially entrusted in only a few hands, is like fire. It can warm, burn, or destroy

depending on whether it is watched, provoked, or increased. The duty of citizens in a free society is not to sit idly by watching the fire of political power but to actively participate in fueling or quelling as circumstances dictate.

“Cato” entrusted private citizens, not virtuous politicians, to preserve and protect freedom. Trenchard and Gordon did not advocate for rational and docile citizenship devoted to an abstract love of its nation. Instead, they believed people should follow their self-interest, fiercely defending their rights and hounding politicians out of office if they overstepped their bounds. Taking from Machiavelli’s account of civic virtue, vigilance and reprisal are powerful tools to protect our rightful freedom.

For Trenchard and Gordon, politicians overreaching their bounds is an opportunity for citizens to seize and make “virtue of their present anger.” We often hear, “Eternal vigilance is the price of liberty.” They might add, “Eternal vigilance and willingness to exact reprisal is the price of liberty,” reprisal being the ability to remove governors who encroach on the freedom of their citizens.

Many intellectuals are preemptively lamenting what they see as the slow death of liberalism and, with it, the American experiment. It would be far more productive to cease writing eulogies and spend more time like “Cato” focusing on how we cultivate a liberty-oriented civic virtue, not only to better our lives now but also to establish values and practices to preserve freedom for generations to come.

Trenchard and Gordon wrote *Cato’s Letters* to shift public opinion in a productive direction toward a freer society—a practice the Cato Institute diligently pursues 300 years later with the same goal: freedom for all. ✦