

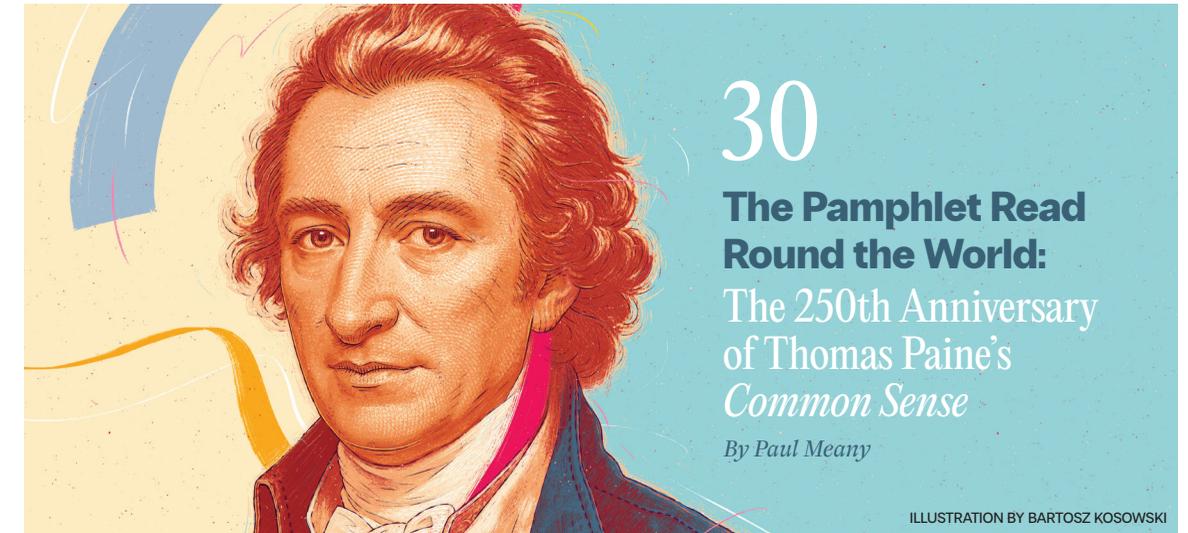
# Free Society



**The Conspicuous Fist**  
of Trump's State Corporatism

# Creating free, open, and civil societies founded on libertarian principles.

Winter 2026



“

Freedom of speech  
is the great bulwark  
of liberty; they prosper  
and die together.

”

Cato's Letter no. 15  
Thomas Gordon, 1721

CATO  
INSTITUTE.

## Features

# 6



**The Conspicuous Fist**  
of Trump's State Corporatism  
*By Scott Lincicome*

# 16

**From Writs to Wires:**  
The Surveillance State's  
Long War on Privacy  
*By Patrick G. Eddington,  
Nicholas Anthony, Jeffrey A. Singer,  
and Jennifer Huddleston*

2 **Letter from the President**

4 **Cato in the News**

38 **María Corina Machado's**  
Promise of Venezuelan  
Freedom  
*By Ian Vásquez*

42 **Whole Foods Cofounder**  
**John Mackey on the**  
Win-Win Mentality That  
Lifted Humanity Out of  
the Dirt  
*By Ryan Bourne*

52 **Cato's Sphere Education**  
**Initiatives:** Igniting Curiosity  
and Civil Discourse in the  
Classroom  
*By Joshua Hardman*

58 **Cato Quarterly:**  
Events, Publications,  
and Studies

64 **Martin "Bud" Mattern's**  
Legacy of Independent  
Thought  
*By Josh Ferencik*

66 **Last Word:** A Cure for  
the "Everything Sucks"  
Epidemic  
*By Marian L. Tupy*

COVER ILLUSTRATION  
BY PABLO DELCAN



## Letter from the President, Peter Goettler

**W**ell, 2026 has arrived. It's the year we'll mark the 250th anniversary of American independence—or the semiquincentennial, according to you show-offs. And while it is a commemoration of the signing of the Declaration of Independence, it has me reflecting on something that happened 11 years later.

I'm thinking about the famous exchange between Benjamin Franklin and Elizabeth Willing Powel. On September 17, 1787, the last day of the Constitutional Convention, Powel asked, "Well, Doctor, what have we got?" And we all know Franklin's legendary reply: "A republic, if you can keep it."

For most of my life, I've mistakenly viewed Franklin's response as rhetorical. Since my childhood, America and our system of government have been sturdy, something we could take for granted. But his reply made perfect sense. America was embarking on a form of government that was radical for its time. And as early as the late 1790s, a figure as eminent as Thomas Jefferson thought that it was already slipping away.

But we have kept it. And we've done so through market collapses, red scares, depressions, wars—and even insurrections as significant as our horrible Civil War.

Of course, we haven't kept it in the form I'd like. As Margaret Thatcher said, "Constitutions have to be written on hearts, not just paper." Ignoring the constraints of the Constitution and the Bill of Rights has allowed our government to grow—in size, cost, and the extent to which it pervades nearly every aspect of our lives—beyond what the Founders would contemplate or what the Constitution would allow.

Despite this, we've remained largely free and have created and maintained an environment

in which human ingenuity and individual dreams can flourish, allowing us all to live lives of prosperity and meaning. The forces of liberalism unleashed in the Founding era ultimately brought the curtain down on slavery and have persistently extended rights, liberty, and the American dream—the promises of the Founding—to groups that had long been denied them. Those who see the Founding as a corrupt bargain to solidify forever the power of white males couldn't be more wrong. And those who believe freedom has only been in retreat since that time are just as wrong.

Now our own times are showing us the wisdom of Franklin's admonition. At this moment, the republic doesn't feel infinitely strong, nor like something we can afford to take for granted.

Admittedly, the architecture of government bequeathed to us by the Founders has long since been bent well beyond its initial shape. But today we're applying more stress to it than ever in our lifetimes.

I'm often asked what I see as the most pressing problems for America and for liberty. The answers today, in my judgment, are as clear as they are concerning: the deterioration of the rule of law, the accumulation of power in the presidency and the exercise of that power in unconstitutional and extralegal ways, and the towering debt we continue to accrue at a breathtaking pace. Each represents an existential threat to the freedom and well-being of our future generations. And they're all the product of a sad bipartisan project—with blame on both sides—that has grown through successive administrations. The

hyperpolarized environment in which we find ourselves is a frightening accelerant.

The first step in "keeping it" is a renewed commitment to the principles and values that animated the Founding and that are woven throughout our libertarian Constitution—principles we must put above partisanship.

There's a lot going on at the moment that contravenes these values: masked government agents disappearing people without due process; targeting of political enemies, be they individuals, law firms, or companies; tariffs fluctuating daily at the president's whim; dramatic new enmeshing of government with private enterprise; and emerging foreign adventurism absent congressional involvement or national debate.

It's time to turn that annoying, Orwellian phrase coined during the war on terror to better use: If you see something, say something. It doesn't matter whether you're a supporter of the president or not. It doesn't matter if you despise either political party. No matter by whom, or to what end it's committed, it's our duty to call out and push back on government action that violates our Founding principles, breaches the Constitution, or contravenes the rule of law. It's a basic responsibility of our citizenship. And a critical element of keeping it. If not for us, then for those who come next.

Peter Goettler  
President and CEO

# Cato in the News

## Recent Op-Eds

### The Washington Post

An Obsession with the Wrong Resources Is Distracting America

—by Marian L. Tupy

### THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Social Security Needs a New Inflation Calculator

—by Romina Boccia

### MSNBC

ICE Blamed Me for Assaults on Agents—Rather Than the Agency’s Own Recklessness

—by David J. Bier

### Forbes

Populism’s Doom Loop: When Feelings Replace Facts, Americans Lose

—by Norbert J. Michel

### USA TODAY

Trump, Kennedy Overreach on Tylenol but Don’t Go Far Enough on Drug Regulations

—by Jeffrey A. Singer

## TV Highlights



Scott Lincicome explains how tariffs are driving higher inflation and affecting consumers on CNN's *News Central*.



David J. Bier discusses President Trump's social media rhetoric and immigration policy on *PBS NewsHour*.



Jennifer Huddleston argues that regulators should take a consumer-focused approach to the Netflix-Warner Bros merger on Bloomberg TV's *Bloomberg Tech*.



Romina Boccia analyzes government spending and the end of the shutdown on BBC News' *Business Today*.



Justin Logan discusses the US military raid in Venezuela and capture of Nicolás Maduro on *ABC News Live Prime*.



Johan Norberg explores his new book, *Peak Human: What We Can Learn from the Rise and Fall of Golden Ages*, on *Stossel TV*.

## News Notes

### George Selgin and Johan Norberg

#### Books on Best of 2025 Lists

The *Wall Street Journal* named former Cato senior fellow George Selgin's book *False Dawn* one of the 10 best books of the year, calling it an "eye-opening" analysis into how New Deal policies prolonged the Great Depression. The *Economist* selected Cato senior fellow Johan Norberg's book *Peak Human* as one of the best books of the year, noting that Norberg "deftly punctures popular misconceptions and adds fresh details and provocative arguments" about the rise and fall of golden ages.

#### Trump Cites Michael F. Cannon on Health Care Reform

Michael F. Cannon, Cato's director of health policy studies, has the ear of the president on health care reform. Cannon is in touch with administration officials, and Trump cited Cannon's policy proposals in a Truth Social post about relief from soaring Obamacare premiums. The highest-value reform would be for Congress to codify Trump's best health care victory from his first term: removing regulatory barriers to affordable, comprehensive, Obamacare-exempt health insurance plans. As Cannon explained in a recent paper, this would reduce premiums and increase choice for millions of people priced out of Obamacare coverage.

#### Two Cato-Connected Figures Win Nobel Prizes

María Corina Machado, a longtime friend of the Cato Institute, won the Nobel Peace Prize for her courageous leadership of Venezuela's democratic opposition. After being barred from running for president, she united opposition forces and documented the regime's election fraud, continuing her resistance while in hiding. Joel Mokyr, a board member of Cato's HumanProgress.org and Northwestern University economist, received the Nobel Prize in Economic Sciences for identifying how innovation and scientific understanding drive sustained economic growth.

# THE Conspicuous Fist OF TRUMP'S STATE CORPORATISM

*By Scott Lincicome*

From steel and semiconductors to defense and mining, the federal government is increasingly intertwined with private firms. This new era of “state corporatism” threatens the market-driven dynamism and innovation that have long underpinned American prosperity.

ILLUSTRATION BY PABLO DELCAN



**A**s the left and the right increasingly agree that the government should embrace stronger economic intervention and industrial policy, they abandon the principles that made the United States the world's most prosperous country and undisputed technological leader.

The most troubling development in this regard is the Trump administration's rapid embrace of "state corporatism" across a range of companies and industries. As of this writing, the US government has taken permanent and direct equity stakes in 12 private firms, in most cases making Washington the company's largest shareholder, with options for an even greater share of state ownership in the future. The government has also wrested a "golden share" in U.S. Steel, giving the state control over an array of corporate decisions and transactions, and has demanded a significant cut of Nvidia's and other US semiconductor firms' sales in China in exchange for lifting security-based export controls. Trump administration officials have also promised more of these moves in the months ahead.

The federal government's state corporatism is unprecedented. Washington has long supported domestic firms with tariffs, subsidies, procurement preferences, tax and regulatory favoritism, and other interventions, but these measures are broad, provided at arm's length, often authorized by law, and subject to limited government oversight. The policies raise economic and political concerns, of course, but they're fundamentally different from state corporatist policies that give the federal government an ongoing, direct, and

in most cases financial interest in a *single company's* day-to-day business operations, its public share price, and its ultimate success or failure—and do so under the thinnest of legal authority (if any at all).

State corporatism is also more coercive. In almost all past cases of US industrial policy, a company's involvement with the government was voluntary—if the company's management and shareholders failed to see a financial benefit in participating in a certain program, it could refuse (or exit). Trump's state corporatism, on the other hand, has routinely been accompanied by at the very least the appearance of state coercion: Equity stakes followed government officials' threats to reject a foreign acquisition (U.S. Steel), agitate public opposition to management (Intel), or ban the export of certain products unless the state gets its cut (Nvidia).

In the rare instances in which the US government has taken full or partial ownership of a private firm, the arrangement occurred during a genuine economic or foreign policy emergency and was expressly temporary, with the government's exit planned in advance and conditioned upon the achievement of certain objectives (e.g., the company returning to solvency). State corporatism, by contrast, has no such characteristics. It is not the wartime nationalization of a steel mill to make tanks, or the emergency rescue of failing automotive giants during a financial collapse. It is the repeated, open-ended, non-crisis intervention in private enterprise—something that will be extremely difficult to unwind and that sets

**“With Uncle Sam as a shareholder, capital flows for political reasons instead of commercial ones, the government dictates routine business decisions (something we have already seen with U.S. Steel), and entrepreneurial dynamism is replaced by static rent-seeking.”**

new precedent for even more such actions in the years ahead.

In explaining the Obama administration's unprecedented intrusions into private industry during the Great Recession, former White House chief of staff Rahm Emanuel famously said at a *Wall Street Journal* CEO council in November 2009: “You never want a serious crisis to go to waste. And what I mean by that—it's an opportunity to do things that you think you could not do before.” Sixteen years later, no crisis is needed. A president can just trot out vague language about national security to explain the partial nationalization of a tech giant like Intel or the effective control of the nation's third-largest steelmaker.

Some call the government's new approach “state capitalism,” but it's clearly not capitalism in any legitimate sense of the word. It's also not quite socialism, either. It's the “Middle Way between ‘atomistic’ competition and central direction” that

F. A. Hayek warned about in *The Road to Serfdom*:

“Nothing indeed seems at first more plausible, or is more likely to appeal to reasonable people, than the idea that our goal must be neither the extreme decentralization of free competition, nor the complete centralization of a single plan, but some judicious mixture of the two methods. Yet mere common sense proves a treacherous guide in this field. Although competition can bear some admixture of regulation, it cannot be combined with planning to any extent we like without ceasing to operate as an effective guide to production.”

When the conspicuous fist of state corporatism displaces the invisible hand of the market, liberty suffers, along with the dynamism, innovation, and prosperity that it fosters. With Uncle Sam as a shareholder,

capital flows for political reasons instead of commercial ones, the government dictates routine business decisions (something we have already seen with U.S. Steel), and entrepreneurial dynamism is replaced by static rent-seeking—from both the acquired firm and those seeking to curry favor with its government owner.

The danger of this new government shadow conglomerate is not just rampant market distortions, lower productivity, and reduced growth, but that the government's balance sheet will expand under its own weight, locking the US into a top-heavy politicized economic model that is antithetical to economic freedom and American flourishing.

State corporatism is thus a serious new policy problem. It also, unfortunately, isn't unexpected.

### Intervention's Mission Creep

Bailouts that began with the Troubled Asset Relief Program (TARP) during the financial crisis of the late 2000s laid the groundwork for the government to take equity stakes in private companies today.

Through TARP, the US government offered support to more than 700 institutions, including temporary equity stakes in five companies. The largest of these bailouts was \$50 billion for General Motors, netting the government a 60.8 percent ownership stake. The government sold those shares over the next few years, resulting in a direct loss to taxpayers of \$10.5 billion. Chrysler received about \$12.5 billion in federal assistance, at a loss of \$1.3 billion for the US Treasury.

A simple accounting of financial losses captures only part of the costs of those

bailouts. The federal government rewrote bankruptcy law on the fly, eroding the rule of law and longstanding precedent. It denied the spoils of competition to more prudent automakers like Ford, Honda, and Toyota, upending the vital process of creative destruction that weeds out bad bets and rewards good ones.

Perhaps most important, as Cato Institute scholars warned at the time, these bailouts set the stage for stronger state intervention in the economy in the future, just as we're seeing now. My predecessor as the director of Cato's Herbert A. Stiefel Center for Trade Policy Studies, Dan Ikenson, made that exact point when he appeared before Congress in June 2011:

"If it is considered a success, the threshold for interventions will have been lowered and Americans will have the opportunity to judge similar bailouts in the future. . . . Americans will be more willing to extend powers without serious objection to the executive branch that we would not extend in the absence of a perceived crisis."

During the same period, the US government also began to think of itself as a public venture capitalist, throwing taxpayer dollars at unproven but politically connected firms. The \$800 billion American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 (ARRA) authorized federal grants, loans, tax credits, and other supports with the goal of boosting energy innovation. The \$475 million Solyndra boondoggle is undoubtedly the ARRA's most notorious industrial policy failure, but, as I documented in 2021,



Protesters affiliated with the nonprofit Code Pink hold up signs during former Treasury Secretary Timothy Geithner's congressional testimony about the Troubled Asset Relief Program in April 2009. (Photo by Win McNamee/Getty Images)

numerous other projects from that period also failed or never needed taxpayer funds to begin with. It's no surprise, then, that a 2024 study found that politically connected firms were more likely to win ARRA grants, but those firms created fewer jobs than their non-politically connected competitors, despite job creation being a main objective of the stimulus bill.

The ARRA was a textbook case of the perils of US industrial policy, yet some in Washington saw it as a road map. Thus arose the even larger industrial policy experiment championed by former President Joe Biden during the pandemic. In both the Inflation Reduction Act and the CHIPS and Science Act, the federal government showered trillions of dollars in

subsidies and other supports to producers of renewable energy and semiconductors, respectively—far more than what the ARRA provided.

These measures have raised concerns about waste and politicization, and their precise economic effects are still the subject of much debate. But one thing is clear: The laws have helped President Trump implement state corporatism in a much more aggressive and intrusive manner than his predecessors.

### When Capital Follows the Crown

Trump's opening salvo, however, arose from a different law, the Defense Production Act of 1950 and subsequent amendments, which authorizes the president to suspend or



A new banner hangs in front of General Motors' headquarters announcing its return to the New York Stock Exchange in November 2010, after the company received about \$50 billion in federal assistance through the government's Troubled Asset Relief Program. (Photo by Bill Pugliano/Getty Images)

prohibit security-related foreign investments via the interagency Committee on Foreign Investment in the United States (CFIUS). When CFIUS refused to approve Japanese steelmaker Nippon Steel's purchase of U.S. Steel, a long-struggling firm in what is arguably the US's most coddled industry, it kicked the final decision to Trump, who promptly used that leverage to acquire a "golden share" in the firm in exchange for approving the deal. While the US government has no formal voting rights in U.S. Steel, the golden share gives any US president complete veto power over countless day-to-day business decisions, including relocation of the company's headquarters, closing or idling plants, shifts in near-term investments, and even pricing strategies.

The Trump administration has already exerted its new control over the company. When U.S. Steel announced in September that it would halt operations at its decaying plant in Granite City, Illinois, which Trump visited and claimed credit for revitalizing with tariffs in his first term, Commerce Secretary Howard Lutnick called U.S. Steel's chief executive to say the president wouldn't allow the plant to stop rolling steel slabs,

according to the *Wall Street Journal*. Now, the site's century-old blast furnaces—so dirty and inefficient that they were slated for demolition mere months ago—are back up and running.

Recent US industrial policy has enabled subsequent state corporatist actions. The government's largest equity stake so far is in Intel, which was also the largest beneficiary of the CHIPS Act, receiving \$8.9 billion in subsidies. Former Intel CEO Pat Gelsinger was one of the most prominent voices on Capitol Hill shaping that legislation, but was ousted in December 2024 amid slumping revenue and replaced by Lip-Bu Tan.

Trump was soon publicly urging Intel's board to fire Tan, baselessly alleging he was compromised by China and threatening to withhold CHIPS Act funding that the ailing firm needed to implement Tan's turnaround plan. After frog-marching Tan into the Oval Office for a meeting in August, Trump agreed to back down on his attacks, but only if the company gave the government 9.9 percent of its public shares in exchange for \$8.9 billion in CHIPS Act grants. The deal came with sweetheart terms, allowing the government to purchase shares at

\$20.47 instead of the \$24.80 mark it closed at before the meeting, a discount at the expense of current shareholders. It also gave the government the right to purchase an additional 5 percent at \$20 per share if Intel exits the manufacturing side of its business by scaling back foundries—clear pressure on the company not to divest, even if doing so makes sound business sense.

The government has leveraged other subsidies, as well as federal contracts, to acquire equity stakes in several companies involved in rare-earth mining and processing: MP Materials, Lithium Americas, Trilogy Metals, Vulcan Elements, ReElement Technologies, Korea Zinc, USA Rare Earth, and Atlantic Alumina. It has tapped the CHIPS Act to make a \$150 million investment in the semiconductor manufacturer xLight, a start-up whose executive chairman is Gelsinger, the former Intel CEO and chief lobbyist for the very same CHIPS Act. The Commerce Department has murkily leveraged Trump's "emergency" tariffs to convince Japan to fund the US government's acquisition of up to 20 percent of domestic nuclear reactors built by Westinghouse. And the Department of Defense recently invested \$1 billion in defense contractor L3Harris Technologies' missile business, meaning that the Pentagon will have an ownership stake in a company that routinely bids on Pentagon contracts.

Even when the government doesn't get an equity stake, it still gets a cut. In August, the Trump administration lifted export controls on Nvidia and AMD semiconductor sales to China in exchange for 15 percent of the revenue from the transactions, and did it again in December for more advanced chips (and a 25 percent cut). To avoid the

Constitution's ban on export taxes, Trump invoked Section 232 of the Trade Expansion Act—and "national security," of course—to impose a 25 percent tariff on a narrow set of advanced semiconductors that are imported into the US for re-export abroad. (All other chip imports have been spared—for now.)

More of these deals, the administration promises us, are in the works, including in different industries. And with them comes rampant capital misallocation, with private investors chasing bureaucratic darlings instead of productive firms or promising start-ups.

Intel's stock has roughly doubled since the government took a stake, while shares of other companies such as Lithium Americas and Trilogy Metals have also shot up. Traders and institutional investors have taken note: A Jefferies Financial Group executive told Bloomberg that "part of this analysis of businesses going forward has to be this political relationship with the state," with more dollars inevitably flowing to the government's favored firms. Another investment group has already filed paperwork with the SEC to create an exchange-traded fund that mirrors the government's balance sheet.

Companies receiving these private investment dollars will likely enjoy higher share prices and more capital, at least in the short and medium run, but they'll do so by taking finite capital away from productive, well-performing alternatives, including in the very same industries. In the end, this capital misallocation will mean less efficiency and lower growth—and a weaker US economy.

Opportunities for cronyism, if not outright corruption, are also inevitable.

**“In the world of state corporatism, costs and profits are second to connections and appearances, and failure is rewarded with more government support.”**

Beyond Gelsinger’s sweet deal, there’s Vulcan Elements, which has connections to President Trump’s son. White House deputy chief of staff Stephen Miller, meanwhile, made a mint after unloading his shares of MP Materials, which had spiked following the firm’s government tie-up, according to the *New York Times*.

State corporatism is also accelerating Washington’s revolving door. Intel, for example, named former Trump administration official Robin Colwell its new senior vice president of government affairs in December. She’ll stay in Washington but leave her previous role as a deputy assistant to the president.

So much for draining the swamp.

**The Rent-Seeker’s Republic**

The Trump administration’s state corporatism doesn’t show any sign of slowing down. Lutnick has reportedly asked other semiconductor firms such as TSMC, AMD, and Micron Technology if they would consider similar arrangements to Intel’s. Quantum computing firms and defense contractors are also reportedly in the president’s crosshairs. Though national

security is the supposed reason for these moves, recent Trump statements make clear that there are no guardrails. “We should take stakes in companies when people need something. I think we should take stakes in companies,” Trump told the *Wall Street Journal* in December. “Now, some people would say that doesn’t sound very American. Actually, I think it is very American.”

It is not remotely American—in fact, it is antithetical to the market-based principles that made America the world’s technological leader. Free-flowing capital markets should reward innovation and punish inefficiency, not allocate resources based on political connections and the president’s whims. Other countries might do these kinds of deals, but America hasn’t—and we’ve benefited greatly from this restraint.

Indeed, perhaps most galling about the government’s new state corporatism push is that there’s no need for it. The dynamism of free markets is much more efficient at coordinating information and directing capital than the state’s clumsy efforts to pick winners and losers. Private venture capitalists, for example, poured a record \$600 million into critical-mineral start-ups in the US last year, according to a *Wall Street Journal* report that noted “startups from Silicon Valley to North Carolina” are providing “new solutions to China’s crackdown on critical mineral exports.” One such case is in Oakland, where the critical-minerals start-up Brimstone is coming up with innovative new methods to produce aluminum, magnesium, and other minerals.

Hundreds of miles away, Provo-based Ionic Mineral Technologies, a start-up with



President Trump at U.S. Steel’s Irvin Works facility in West Mifflin, Pennsylvania, on May 30, 2025, weeks before the US government received a “golden share” in the company as a condition for approving its sale to a Japanese steelmaker. (Photo by Jeff Swensen/Stringer)

no federal equity stake, announced in December that it had confirmed a “major, high-grade deposit of rare earth and critical minerals” along Silicon Ridge—a discovery that the company’s founder characterized as a “watershed moment for American resource independence.” It will commence nearby refining operations soon, with the benefit of sound infrastructure and light-touch regulation, not top-down planning.

In January, Tesla announced that its Texas lithium refinery, the largest and most advanced in the United States, is now operational after breaking ground on the plant just two years ago, again with limited US government involvement.

Not all of these start-ups and investments will pan out, of course, but failure is also an essential part of the market process—disciplining firms, informing investors, and ensuring that survivors are durable and globally competitive. A genuine market system is defined by both profits and losses. “You need to make a process that is lower cost and higher profit, or you cannot bring production to the United States,” Brimstone

chief executive Cody Finke told the *Wall Street Journal*.

State-invested favorites that Washington implicitly deems too big to fail don’t face such discipline. In the world of state corporatism, costs and profits are second to connections and appearances, and failure is rewarded with more government support. State corporatism also makes the president a dealmaker in addition to a policymaker, a role Trump seems to crave, and elevates the executive branch to a position inconsistent with a healthy constitutional order.

Insulated from the pressure of market forces, the state’s investments are bound to struggle eventually. And minus congressional oversight, the executive’s authority surely will expand even more. The real question is not whether this unbounded state corporatism is a problem; it’s “how do we unwind it?” ♦

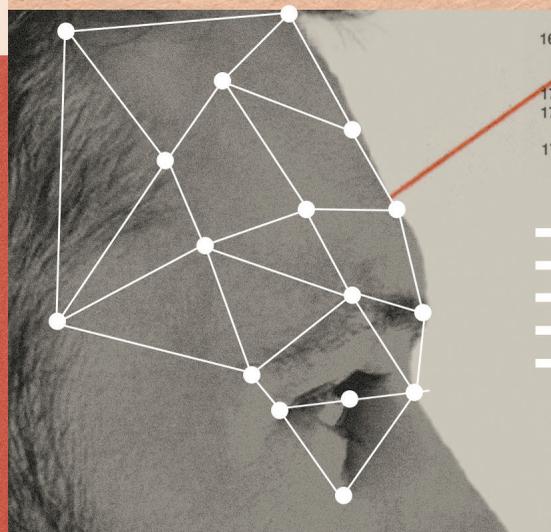
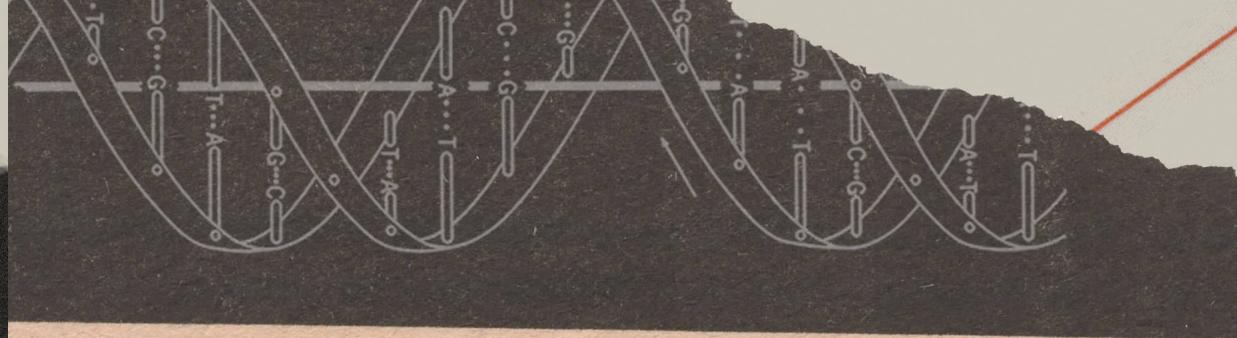
**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Scott Lincicome is the vice president of general economics at the Cato Institute and the director of its Herbert A. Stiefel Center for Trade Policy Studies.

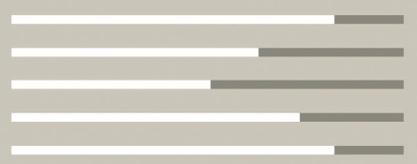


ERVE NOTE

360 I



168  
171  
173  
174



# From Writs to Wires: The Surveillance State's Long War on Privacy

*By Patrick G. Eddington, Nicholas Anthony,  
Jeffrey A. Singer, and Jennifer Huddleston*



In the lead-up to the American Revolution, British customs officers wielded general warrants and physical force to search colonists' homes, stores, desks, ships, and other private property. Anger over these intrusions reached a boiling point with the writs of assistance, which Massachusetts lawyer James Otis Jr. argued in court were the “worst instrument of arbitrary power” and destructive to fundamental principles of law and liberty.

A 25-year-old John Adams watched Otis's five-hour oration in 1761 and later recalled it as a “flame of fire” that left those in attendance “ready to take arms.” “Then and there,” Adams reflected decades later, “the child Independence was born.” Otis's defense of liberty helped lay the groundwork for the Fourth Amendment, which guaranteed the right of the people to be secure against unreasonable searches and seizures.

Two and a half centuries later, the surveillance state is quieter, more pervasive, and largely invisible. Under the banner of security, government has constructed a digital panopticon that allows it to peer into citizens' finances, health records, and personal data on a scale the Founders scarcely could have imagined. This feature examines how that system grew, and how it might yet be restrained.

## American Dystopia: Surveillance-Enabled Political Repression and How to End It

By Patrick G. Eddington

**A** quarter of the way through the 21st century, the scale and ubiquity of America's surveillance architecture has become as mind-boggling as it is terrifying.

Facial recognition (including the mobile variety), iris-scanning apps, finger- and palm-print readers, voiceprint analyzers,

GPS-enabled tracking, automated license plate readers, cell-site simulators, spyware, and online ad tracking software . . . these are just some of the technologies that day by day are making it harder for any of us to maintain our privacy and anonymity.

Corporate actors frequently sell information they collect on you—including demographic and identifier data, health information, financial and biometric data, online activity, communications metadata, and more—to those willing to pay for it. While this is acceptable to many Americans when they are properly notified and given the ability to consent or opt out, a much more serious problem arises when the state



sidesteps the warrant requirement by simply purchasing information on the open market. Law enforcement agencies at the local, state, and federal levels, including the FBI, the IRS, the Drug Enforcement Administration, the Department of War, and the Department of Homeland Security, have been customers of this data, according to a major report by the Brennan Center for Justice.

The evolution of surveillance technologies and techniques is creating new points of vulnerability from a constitutional rights standpoint.

Take the home security business, for instance. In July 2025, Ring announced that, in partnership with security services

contractor Axon, it was resuming its Request for Assistance program, whereby law enforcement personnel will have warrantless access to Ring users' videos. Accordingly, the Ring camera your next-door neighbor installed can now be used by police to monitor when you leave or arrive, when you have guests, when a repairman arrives to fix your stove . . . the list goes on.

Police in California have also been creative in seeking video from another platform: Tesla.

As the *San Francisco Chronicle* reported in 2024, Bay Area police have gone so far as to tow Teslas from crime scenes to get access to data from a given vehicle's external-facing video camera, though they

**“It is unsurprising, then, that a key objective of modern government surveillance state apparatchiks has been a quest to undermine publicly available encryption options.”**

have been forced in several cases to get warrants to do so.

In the case of the FBI, the access that agents have to both commercially available data and classified information, when combined with an internal Department of Justice (DOJ) authority known as an “assessment,” gives them the ability to open an investigation on a person or organization and collect and collate a vast amount of data on the target—all without having to get a warrant.

Under the current administration, President Trump isn’t simply issuing executive orders that have no statutory or constitutional basis to harm individuals, classes of persons, or civil society organizations; he’s personally directed his attorney general to open baseless criminal

investigations and has twisted an already broken federal grand jury process into a vehicle for securing indictments against his political enemies—real or imagined. The Founders launched a revolution to free themselves from these kinds of tyrannical acts.

George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Patrick Henry, John Hancock, Benjamin Franklin, and other early Americans launched and led a revolution against a British monarchy that routinely intercepted their mail and (in Hancock’s case) seized their property because of their opposition to the Crown’s repressive policies, such as warrantless searches and taxation without representation.

Indeed, Jefferson, John Adams, James Monroe, and other Founders used encryption in their personal and professional communications because of British political repression—before, during, and after the Revolutionary War. It is unsurprising, then, that a key objective of modern government surveillance state apparatchiks has been a quest to undermine publicly available encryption options.

Can this part of the slide toward an American autocracy be reversed?

Yes.

In April 2024, the House passed the Fourth Amendment Is Not for Sale Act, which would require government agents to obtain a court order before acquiring certain customer and subscriber records or any illegitimately obtained information from a third party. The Senate failed to act on the bill, which is all the more reason it should be reintroduced.

Full repeal of the PATRIOT Act and FISA Amendments Act would also help turn back the surveillance tide, as both authorities have been serially abused.

A single federal law enforcement agency charter that prohibits surveillance of persons or infiltration of groups engaged in activity protected by the First Amendment, absent probable cause that a federal crime has been or is being committed, should also be created.

The most difficult but necessary reform would be moving the DOJ out of the executive branch and placing it under the federal judiciary.

Congress created the DOJ via statute and has direct constitutional power over both the structure of the federal judiciary and the scope of the Supreme Court’s appellate review authority. These are powers clearly

within Congress’s Article I authority. Accordingly, Congress could statutorily move the DOJ out of the executive branch and include a provision stating that no federal court has jurisdiction to review a congressional act designed to restructure the government to reduce the potential for executive branch tyranny.

A heavy political lift? Almost surely. But perhaps less so in a post-Trump political environment, and absolutely necessary if the republic is to survive for another 250 years.

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Patrick G. Eddington is a senior fellow in homeland security and civil liberties at the Cato Institute and the author of *The Triumph of Fear: Domestic Surveillance and Political Repression from McKinley to Eisenhower*.

## How the State Keeps Watch on Your Wallet

By Nicholas Anthony

There are few places where privacy is more misunderstood than in our finances. Think of all the steps you take to keep your financial information under lock and key. You might post vacation photos on social media, but you probably don’t post your credit card history. You might throw away your mail, but you probably take a moment first to rip up bank statements. Yet strangely, none of that matters to the government.

Put simply, you might think you have financial privacy, but what you really have is the illusion of financial privacy.

This illusion is maintained by a series of laws passed over the last 55 years, including the Bank Secrecy Act, the Money Laundering Control Act, the Annunzio–Wylie Anti–Money Laundering Act, the Money Laundering Suppression Act, the PATRIOT Act, and more. With each new law, Congress steadily expanded what types of transactions must be reported to the government, leading to the opaque financial surveillance web we have today.

If you are thinking this invasion of your privacy sounds unconstitutional, you’re not



alone. When the Cato Institute surveyed the American public, 83 percent of respondents thought the government should need a warrant to access personal financial records. After all, isn't that what the Fourth Amendment is supposed to require?

Unfortunately, that's not how the system works today. The Supreme Court weighed in on this question in the 1970s, ultimately siding with Congress and creating what has come to be known as the third-party doctrine. In short, the idea is that you lose all protections because you shared information with someone else. Yet you can't have an account with a bank (or any traditional financial service) without sharing your information. So, in effect, all those records held by your bank, financial planner, and similar entities are fair game for prying

eyes—as long as those eyes belong to the government.

The groundwork for financial surveillance began five decades ago, but the government is still expanding those powers today. Under the Biden administration, a proposal to further surveil bank accounts with at least \$600 in annual activity was stopped, but a similar proposal to surveil payment apps like PayPal and Cash App took effect. Now under the Trump administration, the government set up a new system for surveilling transactions of \$200 or more sent through money service businesses like Western Union.

Congress has been busy, too. The recently enacted stablecoin legislation, which covers cryptocurrencies pegged to the dollar or another asset, put parts of this new

ecosystem within the confines of the Bank Secrecy Act regime. And there has been a steady stream of attempts to apply these requirements to all cryptocurrency activity.

Now more than ever, it is time to reclaim financial privacy. It's time to turn back the tide on ever-increasing financial surveillance. There are a few options on the table for getting this done.

Taking it to the courts is one route. The Supreme Court has slowly started to recognize that past laws were not crafted with a full appreciation of the digital age. Cases like *United States v. Jones*, *Riley v. California*, and *Carpenter v. United States* have steadily refined the limits on government access to our private lives. Much more is needed, but these have been positive developments.

Yet, even then, the judicial process can be uncertain. Will a case be heard? If it is, what if the Court rules in an unexpected direction? The Court might even weigh in your favor, but base its decision on a narrower or unrelated legal question.

That's why Congress must act. Legislators

got us into this web of financial surveillance and they now have three main options to help get us out.

At a minimum, all the thresholds for reports required under the Bank Secrecy Act should be adjusted for inflation. Congress could go further and eliminate the reporting requirements. Even better, Congress could do away with the Bank Secrecy Act regime entirely. This last route would let banks decide what information they need, whom they do business with, and what risks they take on. It would still be illegal to knowingly assist criminal activity, and law enforcement would still be able to get a warrant should an investigation justify it. The only change would be the absence of this multibillion-dollar surveillance system.

Whichever path Congress chooses, reform is long overdue.

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Nicholas Anthony is a policy analyst at the Cato Institute's Center for Monetary and Financial Alternatives, and the author of *Digital Currency or Digital Control? Decoding CBDC and the Future of Money*.

**“All those records held by your bank, financial planner, and similar entities are fair game for prying eyes—as long as those eyes belong to the government.”**

## How the War on Drugs Undermines Adult Autonomy—and Invades Our Privacy

By Jeffrey A. Singer

Every time an American fills a prescription for medication classified as a controlled substance, they now leave a digital trail available to law enforcement known as a Prescription Drug Monitoring Program (PDMP).

This is the latest iteration of the US government's century-long assault on personal autonomy and privacy through the war on drugs. What began as a moral crusade by policymakers to dictate what an individual can or cannot put in their body has morphed into warrantless surveillance of the once-private space between a patient and their doctor.

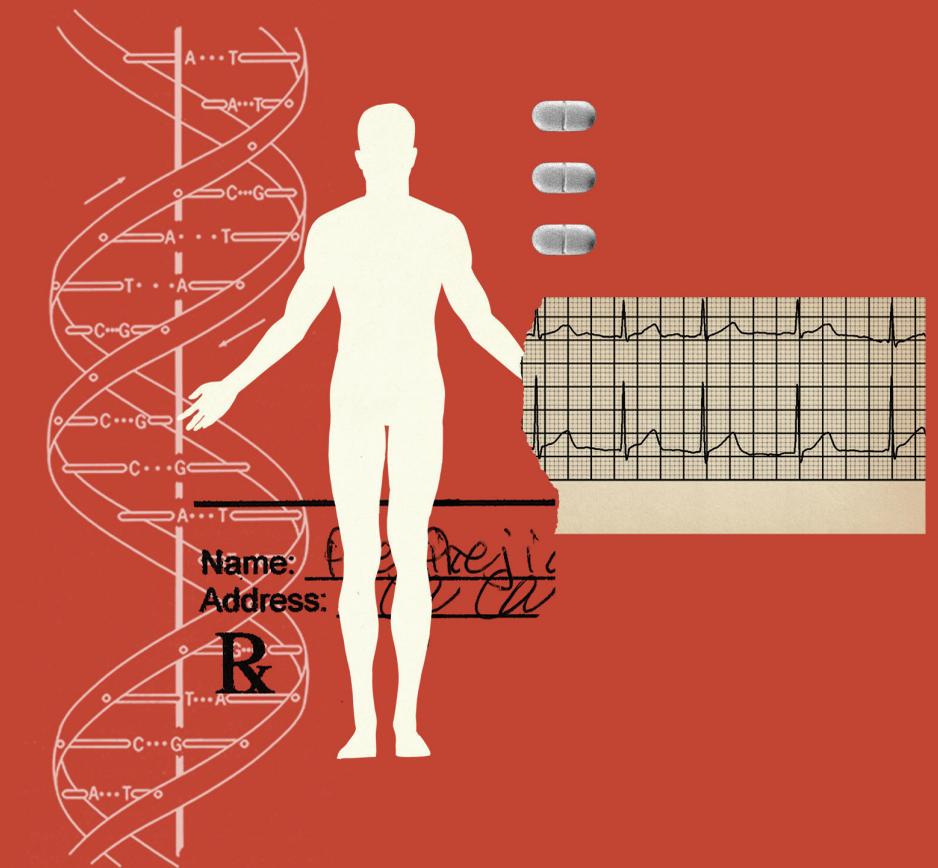
The push for PDMPs began in the early 2000s, when a rise in overdose deaths caught the attention of lawmakers and public health officials. Instead of rethinking prohibition, they found a convenient scapegoat: doctors. The false narrative took hold that physicians were "overprescribing" opioids and turning their pain patients into zombie-like addicts who eventually sought stronger drugs on the street. A flurry of new regulatory and legislative restrictions reduced opioid prescribing roughly 60 percent between 2011 and 2020—and today, it's back to where it was in 1992. But this failed to slow the rise in overdose deaths,

which surpassed 110,000 deaths annually in the years following the COVID-19 pandemic and are currently at record levels. And during the process, law enforcement invaded patients' privacy.

The Department of Justice and the Drug Enforcement Administration first made funds available to states to establish their own PDMPs in 2005. Today, every state, along with the District of Columbia and Guam, has a PDMP. These databases track every transaction involving the prescription and dispensing of controlled substances. They record how often and how much each patient receives, as well as how frequently each clinician prescribes. In effect, PDMPs turn the private act of seeking medical care into a government surveillance effort—an unsettling invasion of the confidential relationship between doctors and their patients.

Federal and state law enforcement routinely mine PDMPs for data to identify clinicians they suspect of "overprescribing" or running so-called pill mills—a term used for clinics allegedly dispensing drugs with little or no medical justification. In practice, narcotics task forces in tactical gear have raided physicians' offices, paraded physicians before TV cameras in "perp walks," and sent a chilling message to other doctors: Prescribe opioids and risk your career—and your freedom.

PDMPs also flag patients accused of "doctor shopping," or obtaining pain prescriptions from multiple providers within a short time frame. Yet many of these individuals are not criminals at all—they're pain patients who have been abandoned or



inadequately treated by their physicians, desperately seeking relief wherever they can find it.

PDMPs also intimidate pharmacists, causing many to refuse to fill doctors' opioid prescriptions.

However, the evidence shows that, while PDMPs may be an effective law enforcement surveillance tool in reducing opioid prescribing, they have not affected the drug overdose rate. In fact, by reducing the amount of prescription pain pills that can be diverted to the underground market, evidence suggests that PDMPs may have

contributed to the rise in overdose deaths, as nonmedical drug users have resorted to heroin, fentanyl, and other more readily available products. Patients in desperate pain and shunned by prescribers have turned to the dangerous underground market to find relief, often overdosing.

A growing body of research examines how clinicians can remotely monitor patients being treated for opioid use disorder, including the gradual tapering of methadone under a specialist's supervision to prevent withdrawal. The broader goal, enabled by telemedicine, is to let physicians

**“What began as a moral crusade by policymakers to dictate what an individual can or cannot put in their body has morphed into warrantless surveillance of the once-private space between a patient and their doctor.”**

manage a wide range of conditions through connected monitoring devices, reducing the need for patients to visit the doctor's office in person. But this new technology can also be used by law enforcement as a surveillance tool.

Congress introduced legislation in 2023 and again in March 2025 requiring the Government Accountability Office to conduct a comprehensive study of remote monitoring for individuals prescribed

opioids, and to submit a report to Congress with recommendations. The bill has not moved forward as of this article's writing. If enacted, such a program would take the surveillance of pain patients to a new level, extending government oversight from the pharmacy counter directly into people's homes.

The US drug war has destabilized governments in Latin America and elsewhere and filled America's prisons disproportionately with black Americans and other minorities. In the process, the iron law of prohibition—“the harder the enforcement, the harder the drugs”—has encouraged the development of more potent and deadly substances entering the illicit drug market.

The war on drugs has not only failed to save lives, it has also steadily eroded the privacy and autonomy that define a free society. Every new layer of surveillance, from prescription databases to remote monitoring, treats patients as suspects and physicians as potential criminals. Adults deserve the dignity of making their own choices about what to put in their bodies and how to manage their pain without government intrusion. Reclaiming that freedom begins with recognizing that health care decisions belong to patients and their doctors—not to law enforcement.

#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Jeffrey A. Singer practices general surgery in Phoenix. He is a senior fellow at the Cato Institute in the department of health policy studies and the author of *Your Body, Your Health Care*.

## **Permission to Speak: How Age-Verification Laws Threaten Privacy and Safety**

*By Jennifer Huddleston*

**A** wave of age-verification laws is sweeping through state legislatures and countries around the world. While aimed at keeping young people safe, this approach is threatening to normalize identity checks, personal data collection, and surveillance as a prerequisite for online speech and access to information. The privacy rights and data of both children and adults are at risk as a result.

Since 2023, about two dozen states have passed some version of an online age-verification law, but many of these laws have been enjoined when challenged in court due to their impact on adult users' First Amendment rights. Those that have been upheld, such as the requirements at issue in *Free Speech Coalition v. Paxton*, have been more limited in applying only to pornography or other adult sexual content deemed inappropriate for minors. At the federal level, multiple bills have been introduced that aim to make age verification a common form of compliance nationwide.

In countries where broader age-verification requirements have taken effect, it's already becoming clear that they affect the rights of all users, limit parental choice, and fail to protect kids and teens.

The United Kingdom's Online Safety Act, for instance, implemented age verification for content deemed “harmful to minors,” including not only pornography but also an array of content believed to promote violence, eating disorders, and a long list of other sensitive subjects. This affects far more than the content that might immediately come to mind. In its aftermath, the act has also required facial scans for the music streaming platform Spotify, limited access to information on the wars in Gaza and Ukraine on certain platforms, and restricted art by acclaimed Spanish painter Francisco Goya. Even accessing a *Free Press* newsletter could require UK readers to verify their age.

Australia, meanwhile, recently became the first country to implement a nationwide ban on social media for people younger than 16. Early reports make the enforcement difficulties of such laws clear, as teens are easily able to circumvent the ban through a virtual private network (VPN), which masks a user's location. For the teens who do find themselves barred from major platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and Reddit, the new law appears to be pushing them toward lesser-known, less moderated corners of the internet, perhaps creating even more risks.

Without undergoing such verification, platforms may deny access or limit the user to a “kid-safe” mode regardless of the user's actual age. The result limits the ability of individuals who are unwilling to submit information about their identity to both speak and receive information. Users have good reason to be cautious about





# The Pamphlet Read Round the World: The 250th Anniversary of Thomas Paine's *Common Sense*

By Paul Meany

First published on January 10, 1776, Thomas Paine's *Common Sense* pushed hesitant colonists toward independence, and its message echoed around the world for the next two centuries.

✦ In a January 24, 1776, letter updating George Washington about recruitment efforts in New England, Major General Charles Lee asked the commander in chief of the Continental Army if he had read *Common Sense*, a pamphlet published anonymously two weeks earlier in Philadelphia.

“I never saw such a masterly irresistible performance,” Lee wrote. “In short I own myself convinc’d by the arguments of the necessity of separation.”

Lee’s endorsement of the pamphlet was just one of many letters Washington soon received about *Common Sense*, whose author made a colorful but concise case for declaring independence from Great Britain and establishing a constitutional republic, the chief aim of which should be “securing freedom and property to all men, and above all things the free exercise of religion, according to the dictates of conscience.”

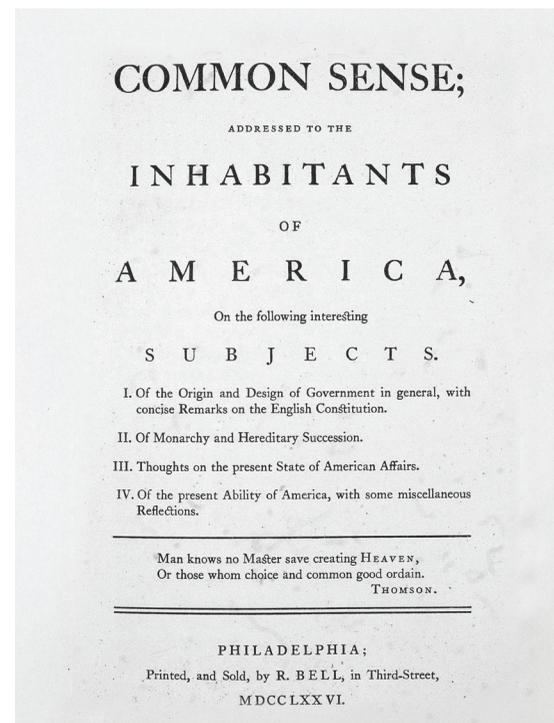
By March 1776, when the author was revealed to be a recent English immigrant named Thomas Paine, George Washington and thousands of other Americans had read and considered Paine’s call for independence.

“By private letters which I have lately received from Virginia, I find *Common Sense* is working a powerful change there in the minds of many men,” Washington wrote in a letter on April 1, 1776.

Three months later, the tide had sufficiently turned to the cause of separation that the United States declared independence on July fourth. Paine’s succinct arguments, or “unanswerable reason” as Washington and others put it,

combined with his evocative language—King George as the “sullen-tempered Pharaoh of England” and monarchy as a system that lays “the world in blood and ashes”—played a decisive role in pushing a hesitant people toward independence.

Paine quickly became one of the most popular authors of the Revolutionary War era. He went on to work as an aide to Washington while writing a series of essays, *The American Crisis*, which opened with the famous rallying cry, “These are the times



*Common Sense* was first published in Philadelphia on January 10, 1776, and quickly circulated throughout the colonies. (Photo by Joe Griffin/Hulton Archive/Getty Images)

that try men’s souls,” and ended with the reflection, “It was the cause of America that made me an author.”

But Paine was never a theorist of America alone; his instincts always tended toward a global message. *Common Sense* tore down the mystique of monarchy and treated limited representative government as the right of free people everywhere, and liberty as the “concern of every man to whom nature hath given the power of feeling”:

“The cause of America is in a great measure the cause of all mankind. Many circumstances hath, and will arise, which are not local, but universal, and through which the principles of all lovers of mankind are affected.”

As the Constitution was being drafted in the soon-to-be United States, Paine traveled to Europe and defended the French Revolution in *Rights of Man* (1791–1792), advancing a universal vision of political liberty that rejected monarchy and insisted that governments derive their legitimacy from the free choice of the governed.

In the 19th century, Paine’s work was circulated worldwide through inexpensive editions, translations, and paraphrases. Reformers and revolutionaries in Ireland, Latin America, and India read his work directly or through intermediaries who had absorbed his political worldview. Although he held no office and commanded no armies, Paine shaped revolutionary politics with his writing, becoming a shared reference point for people who lived under imperial rule.

### Latin America | “Those Who Wish to Reap the Blessings of Freedom”

The 19th-century political situation in Spanish America made fertile ground for Paine’s idea that ordinary people possess the moral authority to design their own governments. For generations, many positions in the colonial bureaucracy had been held by criollos, people of pure Spanish descent born in Spanish America. As the Spanish crown sought to tighten control of its colonies, these offices were increasingly filled by peninsulares, Spanish-born people who were viewed as being loyal to Madrid.

The marginalization of criollos raised the issue of political capacity and whether the people of the Americas governed themselves or lived under the rule of European-born officials. Reformers sought legal and philosophical authorities to support their claim that they possessed the right and ability to shape their own governments. They turned naturally to documents such as the Virginia Declaration of Rights, the French Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen, and *Common Sense*. Paine was particularly popular because he treated monarchy not as an inherited fact of life, but a human invention: “The distinction of men into kings and subjects is a great sin in the world. Nature disapproves it.”

The spread of Paine’s ideas in Latin America depended on translators who saw his writing as an opportunity to reshape the political culture of their societies, including Vicente Rocafuerte of Ecuador,

Manuel García de Sena of Venezuela, and Anselmo Nateiu, an Indigenous Peruvian.

Rocafuerte was an aristocrat born in Guayaquil, Ecuador, in 1783. His life carried him from Mexico to Havana, to the United States and Europe, and back to South America. Rocafuerte recognized that *Common Sense* possessed a universal quality. It provided a direct argument for liberty that resonated with societies still struggling to throw off imperial rule:

“The present time, likewise, is that peculiar time, which never happens to a nation but once, viz. the time of forming itself into a government. Most nations have let slip the opportunity, and by that means have been compelled to receive laws from their conquerors, instead of making laws for themselves.”

Manuel García de Sena served as a diplomat for the Venezuelan government in Philadelphia at a time when Spanish America was seeking new constitutional models. García de Sena produced an influential Spanish adaptation of *Common Sense* in 1811. Scholars note that his translation was incomplete—and even inaccurate in places—yet it captured Paine’s essential message. *Common Sense* became a guide for democratic reform in 18th-century Venezuela and set a precedent for political thinkers in the region. Even a paraphrased Paine could provide a conceptual framework for rejecting monarchy.

In Peru, Anselmo Nateiu, an Indigenous leader, approached Paine’s text from the

perspective of someone whose community had lived under severe Spanish rule. For Nateiu, the translation, which was published in 1821, needed to be localized to his people’s worldview. He altered the text significantly for his Indigenous readers, illustrating the extraordinary flexibility of Paine’s writing.

The power of these translators was not in achieving fidelity to the English original, but in their ability to equip Latin American readers with the arguments they needed at a moment when the entire political order was under strain.

Paine’s influence in Latin America runs so deep that it is still being felt today. Argentine President Javier Milei, a libertarian elected two years ago, quoted Paine at the conclusion of a September 2024 speech at the United Nations:

“The Argentine Republic will abandon the position of historical neutrality that characterized us and will be at the forefront of the struggle in defense of freedom. Because as Thomas Paine said: ‘Those who wish to reap the blessings of freedom must, as men, endure the fatigue of defending it.’”

#### Ireland | The “Koran of Belfast”

By the time Paine died in 1806, Ireland had long lived under a colonial structure upheld by British rule that blended military control, religious discrimination, and economic subordination. When news of the American rebellion reached Ireland, it struck many observers as the familiar story of a peripheral people resisting colonial empire.

“**Common Sense tore down the mystique of monarchy and treated limited representative government as the right of free people everywhere, and liberty as the ‘concern of every man to whom nature hath given the power of feeling.’**”

Irish political societies of the late 18th and early 19th centuries read Paine eagerly. The Irish revolutionary Theobald Wolfe Tone, in his diary, cited Paine’s *Rights of Man* as being the “Koran of Belfast.” The British Whig Horace Walpole commented, “It is now too publicly known to be disguised any longer, Ireland has much the air of americanising.” *Common Sense* circulated among members of the Irish Volunteer movement in the 1770s and 1780s, and later among the United Irishmen movement in the 1790s.

The American Revolution also provided an example of constitutional self-creation. Irish reformers noted that the colonists

had designed their own institutions and explained them openly to the world. Irish radicals applied this principle to their own political system. In *Rights of Man*, Paine argued that governments must justify themselves to the governed:

“All power exercised over a nation, must have some beginning. It must either be delegated or assumed. There are no other sources. All delegated power is trust, and all assumed power is usurpation. Time does not alter the nature and quality of either.”

This century-long struggle culminated in the Proclamation of the Irish Republic in 1916, which declared the right of the Irish people to the ownership of Ireland. Inspired by the American Declaration of Independence, in 1919, the Irish Declaration of Independence asserted that all lawful authority in Ireland flowed from the people alone. These documents echoed the moral logic that Paine and the American revolutionaries advocated: that government exists only by the free choice of the governed.

#### Paine Reaches India

The example of the American Revolution reached India by the mid-19th century. There, reformers including Jyotirao Phule challenged deeply rooted inequalities and British imperial authority.

Born in Pune to a family of agricultural laborers, Phule rejected the authority of the caste system and insisted that equality was the natural condition of human beings. But

“The global influence of the American Revolution rests as much on its ideas that were transmitted by luminaries such as Paine as it does on its institutions.”

it was not until Phule read Paine’s *Rights of Man* in 1848 at the age of 21 that he began to act on his convictions.

His writings, *Gulamgiri (Slavery)* and *Shetkaryacha Asud (The Cultivator’s Whipcord)*, exposed the cruelty of caste oppression and defended the dignity of the individual. Phule and his wife, Savitribai, who became the first female teacher in modern India, founded schools for girls and for children of oppressed castes.

Phule was honored with the title

Mahatma (from Sanskrit “mahātman,” meaning “great-souled”), a title that would later be bestowed on Gandhi, who would draw parallels between the civil disobedience of the Boston Tea Party and the Indian Salt March in 1930.

#### Exporting the Logic of Liberty

While scholars often focus on Paine’s towering influence in Revolutionary France, where his ideas initially fueled libertarian aspirations, the French Revolution’s trajectory quickly veered into a more authoritarian phase under Maximilien Robespierre. Paine experienced these complexities firsthand, culminating in his debate with Edmund Burke over the legitimacy of revolution as a method of political change.

While Paine had passionately defended the French Revolution, his own imprisonment during the Reign of Terror in 1793 forced him to reevaluate that enthusiasm. The stark reality of Robespierre’s terror made him confront how an initially pure fight for liberty had devolved into a new form of oppression.

Yet, beyond France, Paine’s legacy took a different, often more incremental form. Irish reformers drew on his arguments to push against religious sectarianism, Indian reformers leveraged his ideas to challenge caste and colonial domination, and Latin American reformers found in his writings a blueprint for republican institutions. In these cases, Paine’s influence didn’t culminate in a reign of terror, but rather in gradual shifts toward a more free society.



After the American Revolution, Thomas Paine traveled to Europe and published *The Rights of Man* in 1791. (Photo by Michael Nicholson/Corbis via Getty Images)

In each case, Paine’s writings provided a common vocabulary and logic that revolutionaries could adapt to challenge oppressive governments and injustice. The global influence of the American Revolution rests as much on its ideas that were transmitted by luminaries such as Paine as it does on its institutions. The most radical idea Paine embodied was that ordinary people have the right to debate their own government and to criticize authority. This was a message that echoed *Cato’s Letter no. 38*, “The Right and Capacity of the People to Judge of Government”:

“Every ploughman knows a good government from a bad one, from the effects of it: he knows whether the fruits of his labour be his own, and whether he enjoy them in peace and security: And if he do not know the principles of government, it is for want of thinking and enquiry, for they lie open to common sense.” ✦

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Paul Meany is the editor for intellectual history at [Libertarianism.org](http://Libertarianism.org), a project of the Cato Institute, as well as the host of the podcast *Portraits of Liberty*.

# María Corina Machado's Promise of Venezuelan Freedom

By Ian Vásquez

When the US military captured Venezuelan dictator Nicolás Maduro in early January, President Trump committed the United States to the South American country's economic recovery and transition to democracy. The administration now risks squandering the moment by trusting Maduro's top lieutenants—all committed socialists who lack legitimacy among Venezuelans—to achieve that task.

If the US is serious about reform, then it should instead begin working with María Corina Machado, the opposition leader whose movement enjoys widespread popular support and represents the country's best hope for democratic capitalism.

Machado, the recipient of the 2025 Nobel Peace Prize, has spent the past two decades building the moral and political foundation for a free Venezuela. Her team is ready to govern, with well-developed plans for opening the economy, reestablishing civil liberties, privatizing the oil industry and other state-owned enterprises, reforming failing public services such as education and health care, and limiting the size and power of government.

In the 2024 presidential election, the Machado-led opposition won the most decisive electoral victory against the Chavista regime in its 25-year history. The Venezuelan people have already chosen freedom. The US should now work with the leaders they chose to deliver it.

## A Longtime Champion of Freedom

Machado is unique among Venezuela's opposition figures, both in her vision and her accomplishments. She's a well-read and sophisticated classical liberal. She understood Hugo Chávez's rise to power in 1999, his threat to liberty, and how best to combat that threat—in part through sheer intuition and in no small part because she understood the late Venezuelan intellectual Carlos Rangel's prophetic analysis of the country's ills.

Rangel explained that a free-market economy had never existed in Venezuela; rather, what prevailed for centuries was extensive state interventionism and corruption. "These two traditions have been monstrously exacerbated by two new factors: socialism and oil," Rangel warned in the early 1980s. Years earlier, Venezuela had created a state-owned oil monopoly that was being used to expand the state by a political elite that had become enamored of socialist ideas.

That deadly combination led to the economic crises and political dysfunction that gave rise to Chávez. Unlike other opposition leaders, Machado accompanied her political activism with a good dose of proselytizing on the importance of freedom in all its dimensions—economic and personal liberty, the rule of law, democracy, and limits to government power.

In 2002, Machado cofounded Súmate ("Join Up"), a civic organization focused on vote monitoring. It collected millions of



Venezuelan opposition leaders María Corina Machado (left) and Edmundo González (right) are seen here at a protest in Caracas on July 30, 2024. (Photo by Jesus Vargas/Getty Images)

signatures to organize a recall referendum of Chávez in 2004, an effort that failed in the face of credible allegations of fraud. At a Cato Institute policy forum in 2009, Machado described how Chávez had consolidated authoritarian rule and violated human rights over the previous 10 years while maintaining the formal trappings of democracy. At a time when much of the world still justified Chavista rule on the grounds that it benefited the poor, Machado showed that social policy was failing despite massive oil-boom windfalls.

Even though elections in Venezuela took place on an extremely uneven playing field and the country's democratic institutions were severely damaged, Machado ran for the National Assembly in 2010 and received more votes than any other candidate. In 2011, she announced an agenda of "Popular Capitalism" in which Venezuela would "leave behind the entitlement model in order to build true prosperity for its citizens." She mounted a strong defense of private property, exclaiming that "if you can't own the fruit of your labor, then you don't own your labor and thus you aren't free."

Machado set herself apart by not only challenging authoritarianism, but by also challenging the whole ideology of socialism when other opposition leaders still felt they could make socialistic policies work under democracy. Venezuelans remember when Machado confronted Chávez on national TV on the floor of the National Assembly in 2012, denouncing his disastrous record and calling him a thief to his face because of the regime's unlawful expropriations. They recall too how Chavistas broke her nose in the same chamber the following year in the aftermath of Chávez's death and the fraudulent elections that brought Maduro to power.

In 2014, I was with Machado at a meeting in Lima, Peru, along with Peruvian Nobel laureate in literature Mario Vargas Llosa and other classical liberals from Latin America, when she was informed that she would not be able to leave Venezuela if she returned home. Machado chose to go back anyway, knowing she would face increased persecution. We knew we might not see her in person again for a long while, and indeed, she did not leave her country for almost 12 years until her recent escape.

# “Machado, the recipient of the 2025 Nobel Peace Prize, has spent the past two decades building the moral and political foundation for a free Venezuela.”

## Taking the Regime by Surprise

Socialism under Maduro deepened economic hardship and repression, including crimes against humanity. Under his rule, the economy contracted by 75 percent, according to Harvard economist Ricardo Hausmann, who points out that such a collapse “has never happened in the history of humanity in any context outside of war.” Some eight million Venezuelans, about a quarter of the population, fled the country.

Those years also saw an opposition with ineffective, divisive, and even complicit leaders, until María Corina Machado unified it by deciding to run in the 2024 presidential election. After she won 93 percent of the vote in the opposition primary, the regime illegally disqualified her candidacy. Machado then supported Edmundo González to run in her place.

The opposition not only won by a landslide, with nearly 70 percent of the vote, but unlike in past elections,

it was able to prove its victory shortly afterward. For months, Machado’s team had secretly prepared to undertake the logistically complex task of collecting and documenting vote tallies nationwide. The effort involved 600,000 citizen volunteers, who covered more than 80 percent of the country’s voting booths and collected over 80 percent of the tallies.

Machado had outsmarted the dictatorship and taken it by surprise. The ballot-box outcome and scale of the regime’s defeat represented the opposition’s most important victory in more than 20 years of tyranny. By providing the world with undeniable evidence of the Chavista loss, Machado had robbed the regime of its habitual claims to legitimacy. She had not only exposed what turned out to be almost certainly the largest electoral fraud in Latin American history, but she had also revealed the extent to which the regime had lost support from its own ranks, as the opposition could only have collected the vote tallies with the complicity of the soldiers guarding the polling stations. Maduro, of course, refused to leave office, and the world witnessed the brutal repression that followed.

The Machado-led victory thus managed to also discredit much of the Latin American left by putting its hypocrisy and sympathy with extremism on display. The region’s leftist governments that had long provided cover for the Venezuelan regime now had to choose whether or not to condemn their ally. Some did, while others gave the dictatorship outright support or called only for it to provide evidence of its victory, a request that was duly ignored.



At this Cato Institute policy forum in 2009, María Corina Machado warned that freedom requires constant vigilance, and predicted that Venezuelans would one day reclaim it: “We took democracy for granted, and we didn’t realize how much you have to work every day in order to defend freedom. We’re learning it the hard way, but once we achieve it, and we will, I’m sure we will value it much more.”

After the 2024 elections, Machado continued to mobilize mass rallies and display tremendous courage in the face of continued threats to her life and safety, as countless supporters were still being arrested, killed, or tortured. The extreme repression forced her into hiding. She nevertheless used the opportunity to issue regular video messages and calls to action to the nation.

## Toward a Legitimate Transition

María Corina Machado has proven herself to be a principled, politically savvy, and effective leader. She enjoys overwhelming popular support and the political legitimacy required for effective governance. Her team has a well-thought-out plan for the transition to democracy and establishment of political and economic freedom. The United States should begin working with her as soon as possible.

Working with what remains of the dictatorship, by contrast, is an unstable arrangement. The regime’s leaders, some of whom have been indicted by the United States, distrust each other and cannot be expected to work together peacefully to

relinquish their power or move toward a transition. In addition, any major decisions made without the involvement of the Machado-led opposition could be questioned or revised by a future legitimate government. These are not ideal conditions for investment or economic recovery.

Venezuela’s transition to a free society will face significant challenges. But Venezuelan society is not politically polarized or fractured along religious, ethnic, or cultural lines; it is much closer to resembling 1989 Eastern Europe than 2003 Iraq. By working with María Corina Machado, the Venezuelan who unified the country and has done the most to defeat its socialist tyranny, the United States can go a long way toward achieving its foreign policy goals while Venezuelans themselves can establish a liberal democracy. ♦

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ian Vásquez is vice president for international studies and director of the Center for Global Liberty and Prosperity at the Cato Institute, where he also holds the David Boaz Chair.

# Whole Foods Cofounder John Mackey on the Win-Win Mentality That Lifted Humanity Out of the Dirt

*By Ryan Bourne*

John Mackey took Whole Foods from a small Austin-based grocer that was nearly wiped out by a generational flood to an industry-reshaping chain that is changing how Americans eat—a success he attributes to the mutually beneficial nature of capitalism.

In this wide-ranging Q&A with the Cato Institute's Ryan Bourne, Mackey, who serves on Cato's board of directors, details the win-win mentality that powers free markets; dismantles the fantasy of efficiently run government-owned grocery stores; explains why innovation always outruns monopolies; and reflects on the nascent Make America Healthy Again movement. The following transcript has been lightly edited for clarity and length.



**“You’re always trading with your customers and your employees and your suppliers for mutual benefit, mutual gain. That’s the miracle of capitalism. That’s why humanity has been lifted out of the dirt in the last 250 years.”**

**RYAN BOURNE:** You cofounded Whole Foods as a scrappy start-up in Austin and led it for over four decades as a really mission-led firm. You wanted to push the benefits of healthy eating, but you were one of many natural food stores sprouting up at the time, many under what you describe as kind of hippie leadership. What do you think it was about Whole Foods and your approach that meant it was able to break out and become a national chain in a way those other natural food stores perhaps weren’t able to?

**JOHN MACKEY:** You can never know for sure why that happened, but I think part

of it is that we had a desire to be a national chain. We had a vision for it pretty early on, not at the very beginning, but as I tell in my book *The Whole Story*, it was after my girlfriend and I visited the Bay Area that I realized, “Wow, they don’t have any stores like Whole Foods here. We could open up here in the Bay Area and jump outside of Texas.” That seemed to be a crazy idea, but that’s what we did and it worked. So first we had the ambition for it.

Many of the other people were thinking smaller—have a few stores in a city or a few in a geographical area. I was thinking bigger, sooner, and earlier. Then we went and raised outside money—we raised venture capital money back in 1989 and that enabled us to go to the Bay Area and open stores there. They were successful and then we started thinking for the first time that maybe we could be a national company. Also, I think people were satisfied to have just a few stores and earn a good living and be sort of important in their own neighborhood, in their own cities. Back in the day, when the first natural food supermarkets started sprouting up, it wasn’t a very friendly market. It really was mostly counterculture people that went there. My parents’ generation didn’t shop in our stores. They thought they were crazy. They wanted highly processed foods—they thought that was a miracle of technology.

**BOURNE:** What really comes through in the book is that you weren’t afraid of growth. You weren’t afraid of the pursuit of profit, nor were you afraid of the cut and thrust of capitalist dealmaking. Do you think that gave you an edge over some of the other stores that did have national ambitions?



Whole Foods cofounder John Mackey is seen here in 1984, the same year that Whole Foods began expanding to other cities in Texas and eventually other states across the US.

**MACKEY:** I do think we had more of a business perspective on things. Perhaps it was my libertarian beliefs—I just really thought business was a win-win-win game. It was never a zero-sum game in my mind. You’re always trading with your customers and your employees and your suppliers for mutual benefit, mutual gain. That’s the miracle of capitalism. That’s why humanity has been lifted out of the dirt in the last 250 years. The Industrial Revolution led humanity out of this trap that we were in, which really was a zero-sum game.

And I just thought it would be fun. I’m an entrepreneur. We had a lot of good qualities that led to success. We were very picky about our locations. I always knew if we screwed up an early location, that might be the end of the game, end of the story, because we wouldn’t be able to get capital if we weren’t doing well. In the first 25 years

Whole Foods was open, we never actually opened a store that ever failed. It was only later when we started to branch out into locations that we weren’t sure would be successful, and we were still successful in many of them, but finally, after 25 years, we closed a store that wasn’t successful. We had such a long run of everything we opened up being successful, and that built confidence and built a viability to raise capital. We were frugal. We saved our money. We reinvested it. We were careful on locations. We built a great team. We did a lot of things right. We made a lot of mistakes too, and we learned from our mistakes and corrected them.

**BOURNE:** Grocery stores have become a bit politicized in recent years—we’ve had high inflation, concerns about affordability, and now New York City Mayor Zohran Mamdani is proposing city-run grocery stores. As the cofounder of a major grocery chain, how do you react when you hear a politician promise to swoop in and provide groceries more efficiently than profit-making companies?

**MACKEY:** Well, of course I think it’s nonsense. What does he know about the grocery business? I’m not sure he’s ever worked in a grocery store. I don’t know if he’s ever worked in a business at all. I’m not sure he understands much about business or markets. I mean, he’s a socialist, so he doesn’t understand capitalism, or he wouldn’t be a socialist. The Margaret Thatcher quote was true when she said it and it’s still true today: “The problem with socialism is you eventually run out of other people’s money.”

If they’re willing to operate the grocery stores and lose money, then they possibly could be cheaper, because for-profit

businesses can't operate for very long if they don't make money because they can't pay their bills, they can't pay their employees, and eventually they're forced to shut down. So perhaps New York can have government-owned grocery stores that basically are losing money, but they're just simply subsidizing it through taxes on other people. As long as you have money from somebody else, you can afford to operate at a loss. But generally, we all know what the stores will be like—they won't be well operated, they'll



During Memorial Day weekend in 1981, a flash flood wiped out Whole Foods' inventory and caused about \$400,000 in damages. With help from customers, neighbors, investors, vendors, and others, the store reopened just one month later.

be dingy. It'll be interesting to see whether they pay their workers higher wages than Whole Foods pays our workers. I doubt they will do that. And will they be unionized? If they are, then they're going to pay union-scale wages, and that's going to make it more difficult to operate their business.

So put me down as very skeptical. It's an election slogan, right? Politicians make all kinds of promises they don't ever deliver on, and I predict he doesn't deliver on that one.

**BOURNE:** Did you prefer, on a personal level, the excitement of being a start-up entrepreneur or being the CEO of a major public company?

**MACKEY:** I'd say it's someplace in between those two extreme states. The start-up period was difficult. We didn't know what we were doing. The first store—Safer Way, before it was Whole Foods—it struggled. We opened it with \$45,000 in capital, and we lost half the money in the first year. Then we opened the first Whole Foods Market. It was hugely successful, but we had a flood nine months after we opened, which bankrupted us, theoretically bankrupt, but we were able to climb out due to the generosity of our customers, all of our stakeholders, customers, employees, suppliers, the bank, investors, who all came through with additional help, additional capital, and additional supplies, which enabled us to skirt that.

Then there was the heady time of initial growth. It's euphoric, almost, to see that your ideas are working. "My God, this works. We're making money. We're growing. This is fun." And then there was this long period of time after the start-up phase, before we'd been seen as a really big corporation. The

## "I always think in terms of win-win, and I think the most successful dealmakers do the same thing."

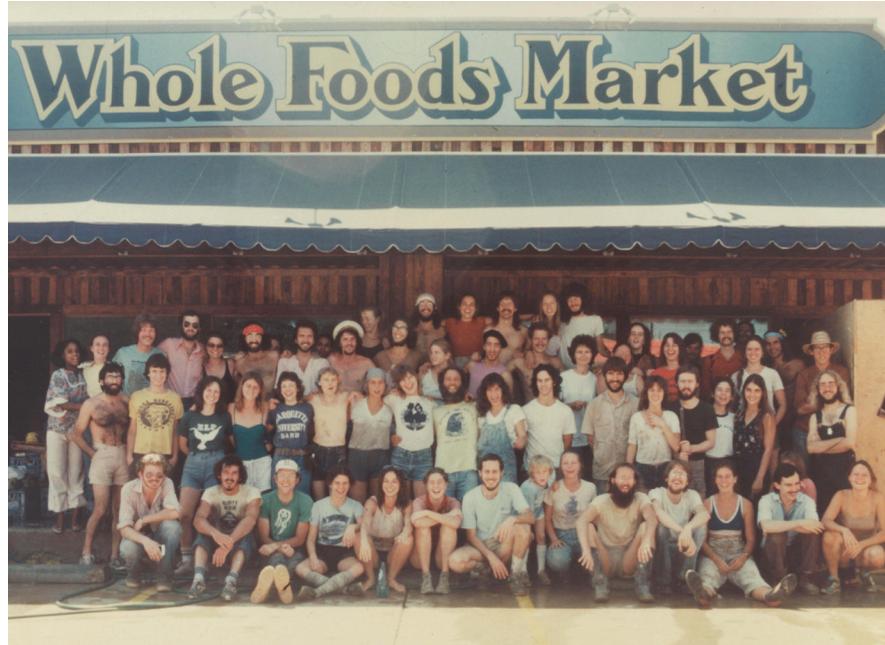
media loved us. They love small businesses that are successful and growing. And I think the turning point was 2009 when Obama was elected president. I wrote an op-ed in the *Wall Street Journal* that was critical of Obamacare and said free-market solutions were better than what we're doing. This is taking us down the road to serfdom, as Hayek would say. And that was not well received. Well, it was well received in the *Wall Street Journal*, and it got a lot of comments, but it really turned the media against Whole Foods Market, turned it against me, and we were no longer this darling. We were now a big corporation making a lot of profit, and therefore we'd gone over to the dark side.

So I'd say from the early 1980s until about 2009 was the best period. After 2009, it wasn't nearly as much fun, because we're being investigated for antitrust by the Federal Trade Commission, I got sued by the Securities and Exchange Commission, and we're being attacked by the media. Walmart and all the other guys realize we're very successful, and they're starting to pick up our products and compete with us more strongly. But there was a great 25, 30-year stretch where it was just the most fun thing I've ever done in my life.

**BOURNE:** There are definitely parts of the book where your libertarianism shines through—the early days at Safer Way, having to deal with getting permits and realizing all the boxes you needed to check. Then in 2007, as you referenced, the FTC tried to block your merger with Wild Oats. Did things like this make you more libertarian? Or did they just confirm what you already knew to be true about the way government operates?

**MACKEY:** In truth, I don't think those had much of an impact on my libertarian beliefs. They reinforced that government is just coercive power, and generally, it's a bunch of bureaucrats who, like Mamdani in New York, think they know how to operate businesses better than businesspeople do, and that businesspeople are doing things for the wrong motives—they're greedy, they're selfish, they are not altruistic—and they're attacked for that. They're attacked for their motives, which in fact oftentimes are actually good motives. Starting in the mid-2000s, the media did not like to tell good stories about Whole Foods Market—all the philanthropy we did, all the good things we did, all the value we created for our employees, our suppliers, our investors, all the customers. We created massive value for every one of our stakeholders, but that's a story the media doesn't want to tell because it wants to tell an anti-capitalist, anti-corporation narrative.

So I'm still a very strong libertarian. I'm probably not quite as strong a libertarian as I was 30 years ago or so, because I had the idealism of youth—libertarian philosophy could create basically utopia on Earth if we would just implement it completely. I no longer really believe that. I think human



The first Whole Foods Market opened in 1980 in Austin, Texas, after John Mackey's original store, SaferWay, merged with another health food store, Clarksville Natural Grocery.

nature is very complex. There's a need for a certain amount of government to check and balance. Now, we have way too much government, but in general, I'm probably a little more open to some of it than I was when I was younger, when I had the enthusiasm of a new convert to a new philosophy.

**BOURNE:** Yeah, I think there's all sorts of ways that we change our views as we get older. But stepping back for a second, one policy area that I think your 2007 run-in was kind of a precursor to was this return of the idea about monopolies and breaking up big companies. And reading your book, it struck me that grocery stores are quite a good example of an industry where, if you have a company expand to a whole bunch of different cities, it often increases competition in those local markets, even if it's true that the national market share of that specific company goes up. How did you, as a CEO who operated in the industry, think about competition between firms?

**MACKEY:** I think I have a radical view on this. One of the things I believe is that there's no such thing as a monopoly over the long term. You can get strong competitive advantages,

and there are a lot of ways to do that, but I've lived long enough to see so many so-called monopolies disappear and be disrupted. When I was younger, General Motors (GM) was the big monopoly. We needed to do something about GM because they were going to completely take over the automobile industry. And yet all we had to do is let Japan compete, and then all of a sudden, GM was more of a paper tiger. In my lifetime, I saw them go from so-called monopoly to bankrupt, and Obama bailed them out. Kodak used to seem to be a monopoly in film, but then digital technology came along and made it irrelevant. And IBM—"IBM is going to completely dominate the technology industry"—then Microsoft came along, and Apple came along, and all of a sudden, IBM is no longer such a dominant corporation anymore.

Here's my thesis: Basically, innovation never ceases in free markets, innovation is happening all the time. Let's take Google—it kind of looks like they have a monopoly in search. They dominate it so much, but will they continue to have that dominance? I don't know if they will or not because of AI. If you do a Google search now, the first thing

you get is an AI overview through Gemini. But then, when we have wearables that have an AI on our watch and we don't have to do a search, we'll just talk to the AI and it'll give us the same information. So what does that do to Google? They're just another AI player. Maybe their monopoly in search is just going to become irrelevant. I think that happens to all businesses over time. Also, the founders and the entrepreneurs that create them get old and die, and then you have professional management that takes over. They have MBAs and they're smart people, but they don't necessarily have the same kind of entrepreneurial vision.

I just don't really believe in any kind of long-term monopoly. I think things get disrupted, and it's impossible for a corporation to maintain a monopoly unless it uses the government to prevent competition, and therefore I really don't believe in antitrust. I think we should get rid of it, because I think it does more harm than good. The market will disrupt all so-called monopolies over time. It might take a decade or two, but it's what always happens.

**BOURNE:** I'm really intrigued by your approach to dealmaking. You've said that a lot of people go into negotiations and try to squeeze as much as possible. But with your approach, I think you recognize that deals are mutually beneficial, but also there's an opportunity cost to your time. You always went in with the attitude of: What concessions are necessary to get this deal over the line? I've long had a theory that one of the reasons some people dislike capitalism is, despite the fact that deals are mutually beneficial, people constantly have in the back of their head, "Well, I could have gotten a

bit more if I'd tried harder. That guy made a profit as well. I could have squeezed harder."

**MACKEY:** That's a zero-sum mentality, Ryan—that's the very thing they don't understand about business and about capitalism. It's not zero-sum, it's mutual benefit.

I always wanted the other person to feel good about the deal because that helps enhance your own reputation for future dealings with other people, since they'll say good things about you. You also may want to do a deal with this person in the future, so it's not a one-time transaction. You have potential future transactions, and so you want whoever you make a trade with to feel as good about that trade as possible. I always think in terms of win-win, and I think the most successful dealmakers do the same thing.

The way I always thought about it is, "Okay, what is it going to take to get this deal done?" I always try to find out what the other person wants, and then I can ask the question: Am I willing to pay for it? For example, say we're trying to do an acquisition—the sellers are always going to think it's worth more than it is, and maybe we shouldn't have to pay as much. But this is what it's going to take to get the deal done, and we're still going to win immensely. We're going to change their business model, we're going to make it more efficient, we're going to add our scale, we're going to add our culture, and we're going to get so much more out of this business than they could get out of it once we start actually operating it. So, I was always willing to pay a little bit more, because I could see how much it would benefit us, and I think that's one of the secrets to Whole Foods' success.

**“I just don’t really believe in any kind of long-term monopoly. I think things get disrupted, and it’s impossible for a corporation to maintain a monopoly unless it uses the government to prevent competition.”**

**BOURNE:** We’ve just lived through a very high burst of inflation and people don’t like the fact that they’re no longer paying 2019 market prices. How would you, as a former CEO of a company whose business model was about a willingness for people to pay a premium for high-quality natural organic produce, navigate that kind of business and political environment we’re living through, where people are more concerned about affordability than before?

**MACKEY:** People are going to believe what they believe, and the media have a continued drumbeat of negativity. They need to read *Superabundance* by Marian Tupy and Gale Pooley, or *Enlightenment Now* by Steven Pinker, or *Rational Optimist* by Matt Ridley, or a new book that’s just come out by my friend Alexander Green—another good

libertarian—called *The American Dream*. He documents how much better off people are than in the good old days in almost every possible way we can imagine.

I think it’s not that zero-sum is back—it never left. I mean, zero-sum is how most people are taught to think. Think about the way sports are: At the end of the day, there’s usually just one winner, the champion, and everybody else ends up being a loser and hopes they’ll do better next year in any kind of professional sport. That’s certainly true of college sports as well. Most games we play are that way—they’re win-lose games. So people think that’s the way the world works, and it largely has been the way the world works, until capitalism came along, until we had a philosophy of voluntary exchange for mutual gain—that changed everything. It was only once we got the genie out of the bottle, so to speak, and the businesspeople were able to escape from the terrible regulations that made it very difficult to accumulate capital, and if you did accumulate it, there was no way to keep it stored safely so you can reinvest it. We were in that trap, the zero-sum trap, and we’ve escaped it. But that doesn’t mean human thinking has evolved. Most people still think in terms of zero-sum. They still think in a win-lose model.

But the beautiful thing about business and capitalism today is that it’s really win-win-win. Good for you, good for me, good for all of us. The whole society is benefiting as a result. I think that’s the single biggest task for economists, the need to say that over and over and over again. We’re all benefiting over the long run. The tide is lifting all the boats, maybe not equally—but inequality is never going to go away. Humans are always going to be unequal in beauty, talent, intelligence,

and drive. There’s just no way to make it equal without using the coercive power of government and turning yourself into a totalitarian state, which is where socialism always tries to get to in the end, to try to force egalitarian outcomes when it’s not what would happen naturally.

**BOURNE:** We’ve seen the rise of a Make America Healthy Again movement. It’s fair to say, from a libertarian perspective, that it’s a bit of a mixed bag. But one thing they have been railing against is processed food, ultraprocessed food, warning about diet-related chronic disease. So this message is resonating with some conservatives and folks outside the traditional Whole Foods customer base. If you were still CEO of Whole Foods, would you be trying to tap into this development—healthy eating not just for coastal liberals but for everyone?

**MACKEY:** In general, capitalism provides what people want, and what people want is calorie density. They want a lot of calories because it’s in our genes. We evolved not getting enough calories for tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands, perhaps even millions of years. And so anytime we can get something that has a lot of calories, whether it be fat calories, protein calories, or carbohydrate calories, it tastes good to us. That’s what we want to eat. Veggies are incredibly nutritious foods but they’re pretty low in calories, so most people don’t like them. Processed foods are loaded with calories—sugars, refined grains, oils, all that stuff. A donut, for example, is nothing but fat and carbohydrates, and people love them. And so now 74 percent of Americans are overweight, and 43 or 44 percent are obese.

But what are you going to do about that? Processed foods are killing us, but unfortunately it’s what people want. Are you going to make them illegal? You’re going to create a black market for people going out and getting their donut fix or their french fry fix, because that’s what people want to eat. So it has to be a consciousness revolution. I don’t eat that food myself. I’m aware that those foods are bad for me, and I eat to nourish my body and have done so for many years, and I’m very healthy as a result. But we don’t teach nutrition in our schools, and most people are ignorant, and they just eat food that tastes good. I mean, I remember when I got to college, the first thing I thought was, “I can eat as much ice cream as I want.”

Fortunately I didn’t stay on that track for very long and I started to learn about food and nutrition, so I had a consciousness shift. But I don’t think you can ask, “What can MAHA do?” Are they going to use the coercive power of government to prevent people from buying food that they actually want to eat? I think it’s a longer-term thing. It’s not something easily corrected, and it starts with trying to get people educated about nutrition and healthy eating into our schools, and for people to pay more attention to it. Otherwise they’re just going to make it worse by trying to force people to do things they really don’t want to do. I don’t like to see government get stronger for any reason, particularly if it’s going to be the food police. ✦

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ryan Bourne occupies the R. Evan Scharf Chair for the Public Understanding of Economics at Cato. He is the author of *Economics in One Virus* and editor of *The War on Prices*.

# Cato's Sphere Education Initiatives: Igniting Curiosity and Civil Discourse in the Classroom

By Joshua Hardman

Teachers from Massachusetts, North Carolina, and Colorado, all in the Sphere network, spoke to *Free Society* about the challenges of teaching in 2026 and how they are promoting civic culture.



Middle school teacher Nancy Wickham in front of a United States flag painted by students at Mountain Middle School in Colorado for a Veterans Day project.

There is no shortage of concern about the technological, political, and cultural forces that are shaping the education of America's next generation. The prevalence of social media, short-form video content, and artificial intelligence has prompted worrisome news stories about students arriving at college without the attention span required to read a book, much less think critically about conflicting ideas or engage with classmates of a different opinion.

A hyperpolarized political environment doesn't help, as lawmakers and bureaucrats are increasingly dictating curricula across the country and prohibiting some viewpoints altogether.

For educators, these pressures are already shaping everyday classroom interactions.

"The curiosity—the willingness to learn—is what we're struggling with," said Dr. Travis

Towne, a civics and financial literacy teacher at Lenoir County Early College High School, a public school in North Carolina. "For so long, they've been told they have to think this way or that way. . . . I had to pry out any willingness to converse."

But something changes when students are given permission to explore diverse viewpoints.

"Once we start, then they're all chatty as can be, because now the floodgates are open," Towne said. "All the questions they had and were shut down—now they start coming out, and that's what I want."

Towne credits much of his success in fostering a climate of civil discourse to his work with the Sphere Education Initiatives, which the Cato Institute launched in 2019 in response to rising demand for more viewpoint diversity in education. Towne is

one of more than 20,000 public and private school educators in Sphere's growing network. These educators come from across the political spectrum, but they all share a common goal: cultivating openness, curiosity, and civil discourse in their classrooms—then sending students into society with the habits of mind necessary for the responsibilities of citizenship.

Sphere offers year-round learning to educators through conferences at Cato headquarters and workshops in schools nationwide. Educators have access to webinars on pressing current events, a podcast (*The Teacher's Sphere*), and small mentorship groups with the Alumni

Fellowship where they can workshop ideas with fellow alumni and Sphere staff. Sphere also provides educators with robust lessons, tools, and explainers across disciplines covering topics including economics, politics, and human progress.

Julian Kenneth Braxton, a history teacher and the Bezan Chair for Community and Inclusion at the Winsor School, a private all-girls' school in Boston, remembers a visit by Sphere director Allan Carey a few years ago for professional development.

"As history teachers we are used to these difficult conversations, but I think now and then, it feels a lot more loaded, just the climate we're in," Braxton said. "What Allan gave us is the opportunity to think about this in some really nuanced and important ways, and to really get into these important issues."

For many alumni, the transformative moment comes during the summer at the five-day Sphere Summits, where educators learn from Cato's policy scholars, who present and engage in conversation with scholars from other organizations.

"It's incredible to get to see civil discourse in action, to hear such diverse perspectives from authors who I would have perhaps never heard of or learned about," said Nancy Wickham, a social studies teacher at Mountain Middle School, a public charter school in Colorado. "That's so reinvigorating for educators, getting to sit and listen and observe. It's difficult to pinpoint sessions, but I appreciate sessions that challenge me as a listener to be open to perspectives that are so different from my own. The panels on immigration and globalization were very



Julian Kenneth Braxton guides students through a lesson on civil discourse in a Politics of Identity class at the Winsor School in Boston, laying the groundwork for meaningful conversations with students from Sidney High School in Montana.



High school teacher Travis Towne (middle right) discusses ways that he fosters civil discourse in the classroom at Sphere's Alumni Fellowship Program. The panel also includes Sarah Lane (far left), Sphere's educator engagement specialist, and educators Enaye Englenton (middle left) and Kimberley Briles (far right).

interesting and caused me to think about my own biases."

Sphere events don't just inspire reflection—they spark action. Building on a long-standing collaboration connecting students across 2,000 miles, Braxton and his longtime friend and colleague Brad Faulhaber, a social science teacher at Sidney High School in Montana, used the Sphere Alumni Fellowship to deepen their work on civil discourse.

"Montana offers a range of experiences that our students don't have," Braxton said. "The first few classes, it's all just getting to know each other. 'What do you like?' 'What do you do in a normal week?' The Montana students will talk about hunting, and so early on, you begin to think, 'Oh, wait a second, they have big passions about the Second Amendment.'"

For Braxton, these are valuable moments: "If you discover something about someone's political ideology, that should not be

an invitation to stop. That should be an invitation to ask a question. You may want to be friends, you may not, but not because of their political ideology."

Back in North Carolina, Towne has developed his own methods to create similar interactions. For one exercise, he employs a simple setup involving objects such as cones or cards, and structured turn-taking, to transform unwieldy debates into chances for students to fully articulate their thoughts and ask better questions. With Towne facilitating, one student at a time will hold the object, explain their reaction to a policy or philosophical dilemma, and respond to others' questions.

"They're not trying to argue with the person. They're trying to identify what their thought process is for that idea," Towne explained. He found this approach works even for controversial topics such as abortion policy: "Students that traditionally hold more of a liberal viewpoint were more

**“Those small but meaningful shifts in how students encounter ideas are building the civic habits a free society depends on.”**

conservative than was assumed, and vice versa, after we did the activity. They would have never realized that if they hadn't had the conversation and the ability to hold the cards up.”

These discussions require teachers to be equipped with the skills and tools to implement civil discourse for discussing complex issues. The best teachers practice lifelong learning—which is why Towne joined Sphere's new Alumni Fellowship Program, where teachers brainstorm new projects and curricula to bring Sphere's approach into more classrooms.

The program transformed Wickham's annual Civics Day project; she had been bringing local officials to Mountain Middle to speak about civic engagement, but now she connects students directly with local nonprofits for community service projects.

“We got 300 students out of the building for the entire day, and they were engaged in civic learning work, from visiting the nursing home to trail work and trash cleanup.”

Wickham developed the projects with other Sphere fellows and staff: “Getting to share challenges and obstacles with others was helpful. . . . It's how I ended up developing this program. I am hopeful that this will become more of a collaborative, school-wide initiative, and I do my best to narratively tie it into what we're doing in the classroom.”

For the 250th anniversary of America's Founding, Wickham worked with Sphere to create lesson plans about the Declaration of Independence and other historical documents such as the Magna Carta. One lesson guides students through a team rewrite of the document using modern language.

“They loved doing it last year,” Wickham recalled. “They wanted to share their versions with everyone. Kids who typically are zoned out are asking me after class, ‘Can we rewrite Hammurabi's Code too?’”

Sphere's lesson plans at [sphere-ed.org](http://sphere-ed.org) provide new methods for teaching timeless ideas and critical periods of history, expert insights into pressing policy areas, and frameworks for discussing contentious news. In January, a *PBS NewsHour Classroom* article about immigration raids in Minnesota encouraged students to use Sphere's tips for healthy discourse norms as a guide for discussing the issue and other contentious topics. Cato's reputation for nonpartisanship makes Sphere curricula approachable, and surveys show that skeptical teachers overwhelmingly say that reputation was strengthened when they met the Sphere team. Nearly 2.5 million students every year are taught by the current network of



Allan Carey (left), director of Sphere Education Initiatives, moderates a conversation at a Sphere Summit on elections and voting with Gréta Bedekovics (middle), director of democracy policy at the Center for American Progress, and Walter Olson (right), a senior fellow at the Cato Institute's Robert A. Levy Center for Constitutional Studies.

Sphere teachers. Many of those students will graduate having been exposed to more of the core principles of liberty underpinning individual rights and constitutional governance, as well as optimistic data from Human Progress.

Thousands of teachers have joined Sphere in its mission because it doesn't tell students what to think—it helps teachers give students permission to think and speak freely.

“My students can guess my political ideology by reading the letters to newspapers I write, but maybe not, because I try to be nuanced,” Braxton said. “What I try to get my students to do is to really think specifically about issues that really matter to them, and how to articulate that, but also how to be open. . . . We do live in these news silos—that's one of the things I worry about—and our students know that, and they acknowledge that. For one assignment, I asked them to look at some news stories, and they were purposeful about looking at

different media they don't normally look at, and they found it very interesting.”

Those small but meaningful shifts in how students encounter ideas are building the civic habits a free society depends on.

The future will be brighter if we can get every student this interested in asking questions about what defines America in this 250th year of our nation's Founding, namely the ideas that guided the American revolutionaries then and that guide Cato's work today: individual liberty, limited government, free markets, and peace. ✨

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Joshua Hardman is a development communications manager at Cato and contributing writer for *Free Society*.



For a deeper look at Sphere's work, scan the QR code to the left and watch the award-winning documentary *Voices of Tomorrow*.

EVENTS



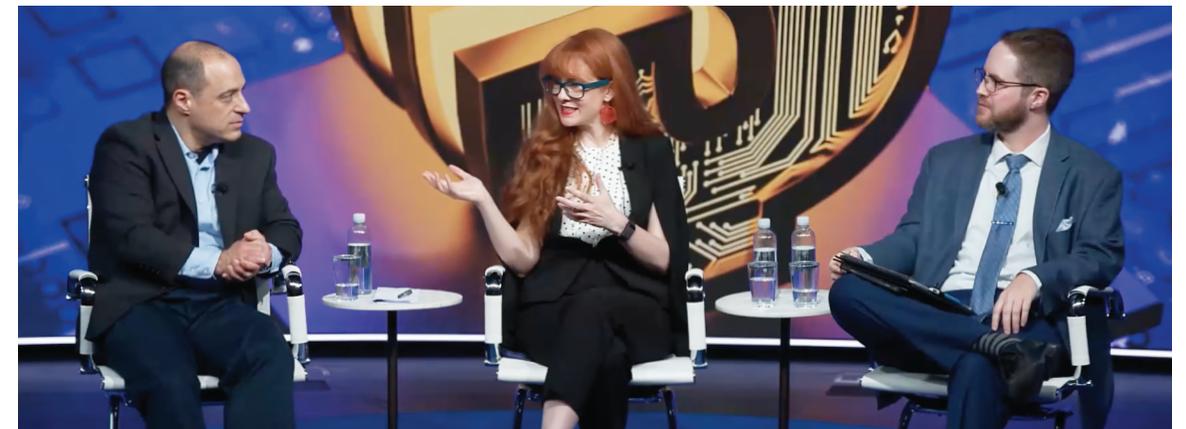
**Reimagining Social Security: Global Lessons for Retirement Policy Changes**

Cato Institute scholars and leading retirement policy experts gathered for the launch of *Reimagining Social Security: Global Lessons for Retirement Policy Changes*, a new book by Romina Boccia (top right), Cato's director of budget and entitlement policy, and Ivane Nachkebia (top left), a research consultant at Cato with a primary focus on Social Security. Panelists discussed public opinion, structural reforms, and lessons drawn from Canada, Germany, Sweden, New Zealand, and other countries. Other Cato scholars included Adam Michel (bottom right), director of tax policy studies; Hunter Johnson (bottom left), a research associate for Cato's Project on Public Opinion; and Krit Chanwong (middle), a quantitative research associate.



**How China's Economic Growth Is Influencing US Foreign Policy**

Justin Logan (right), director of defense and foreign policy studies at the Cato Institute, moderated a wide-ranging discussion about China's economic growth and how it influences US strategy, security, and global power. Stephen G. Brooks (left), professor of government at Dartmouth College, challenged conventional wisdom about China's economic strength, arguing that the US and its allies retain significant but underappreciated economic leverage over Beijing, particularly in high-tech production and global supply chains. Gerard DiPippo (middle), associate director of the RAND China Research Center, argued that the US still needs to grapple with China's manufacturing capacity and leadership in key industries such as biotech and AI.



**Fifty-Five Years of the Bank Secrecy Act**

Over the last five decades, the Bank Secrecy Act has created a vast surveillance apparatus that monitors virtually every financial transaction Americans make. Norbert J. Michel (left), vice president and director of the Cato Institute's Center for Monetary and Financial Alternatives (CMFA), and Nicholas Anthony (right), a policy analyst at CMFA, were joined by Ludlow Institute president Naomi Brockwell (middle) for a discussion about the law on its 55th anniversary, including how it shaped our modern financial system, implications for the Fourth Amendment, and the reforms that are much needed.

EVENTS



**Film Screening for *When Cops Become Robbers***

The Cato Institute held a screening of *When Cops Become Robbers*, a powerful new documentary about how civil forfeiture laws allow police to seize cash and property from Americans who are never charged, much less convicted, of a crime. After the screening, Clark Neily (right), Cato’s senior vice president for legal studies, held a panel discussion with Institute for Justice senior attorney Dan Alban (left) about the film and potential reforms to civil asset forfeiture.



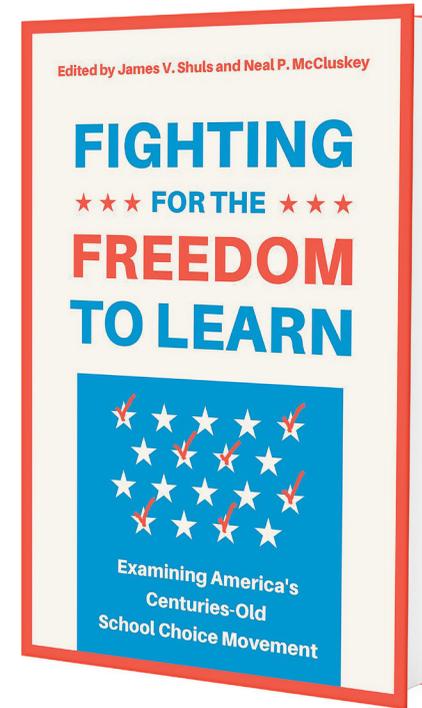
**Cato Hosts Florida Shark-Diving Guides Who Received Presidential Pardons**

Mike Fox (far right), a legal fellow at Cato’s Project on Criminal Justice, hosted Florida shark-diving guides Tanner Mansell (middle left) and John Moore Jr. (middle right) at the Institute in January. Jodi Mansell (far left), Tanner’s mom, also joined the panel. Moore and Mansell were charged with felony theft for an honest mistake then convicted at trial by a seemingly hesitant jury in 2022. Fox and Clark Neily, Cato’s senior vice president for legal studies, filed an amicus brief during Mansell and Moore’s appeal, arguing that jurors were not properly informed about their power to acquit against the evidence. Neily featured the case in the spring 2025 issue of *Free Society*, while Fox testified before Congress last May about the men’s ordeal. Just weeks after that, President Trump pardoned both Mansell and Moore.



View all past and upcoming Cato events at [Cato.org/events](https://Cato.org/events) or scan the QR code.

PUBLICATIONS



**Fighting for the Freedom to Learn: Examining America’s Centuries-Old School Choice Movement**

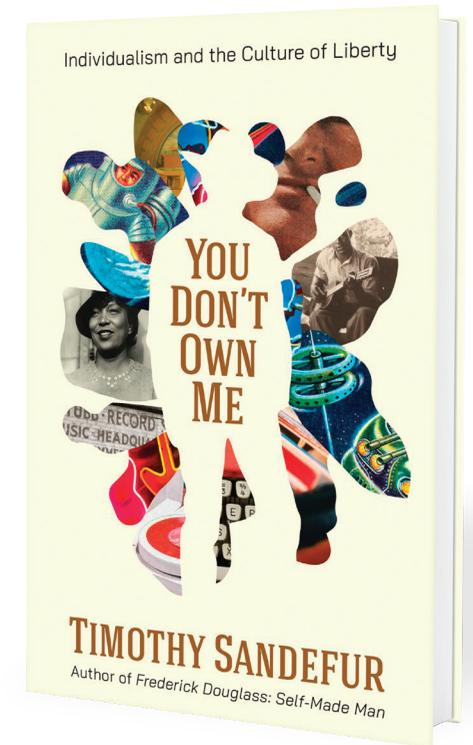
The school choice movement is often seen as a modern, partisan undermining of a cherished institution: public education. *Fighting for the Freedom to Learn* sets the record straight, revealing that the struggle for educational freedom is as old as America itself and rooted in a deep and enduring tradition of parents and communities shaping how children learn. Neal P. McCluskey, director of Cato’s Center for Educational Freedom, and James V. Shuls, head of the educational liberty branch at the Institute for Governance and Civics at Florida State University, assembled contributions from 12 leading education scholars in this sweeping history of school choice in the United States.



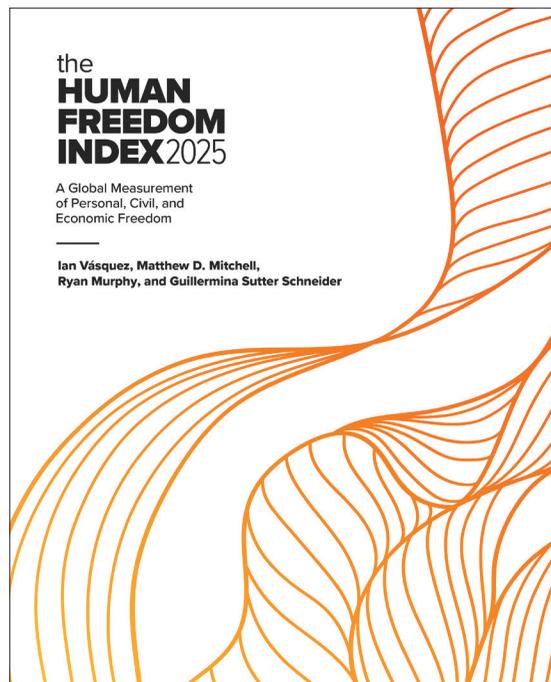
View the latest books and studies at [Cato.org/pubs](https://Cato.org/pubs) or scan the QR code.

**You Don’t Own Me: Individualism and the Culture of Liberty**

The idea of individual liberty has had a well-documented and enormous influence in politics, economics, and religion, but its influence on the arts has also been immense. From pop music to films—from the poetry of John Milton to *Star Trek* and the novels of Zora Neale Hurston—individualism has made a cultural impact both pervasive and profound. In *You Don’t Own Me*, Timothy Sandefur, an adjunct scholar at Cato and vice president for legal affairs at the Goldwater Institute, examines how people in America and Europe have addressed the unique experience of personal freedom in movies, songs, literature, and even architecture.



FEATURED CATO STUDIES



**Human Freedom Index 2025**

The *Human Freedom Index 2025* paints a stark picture of a world drifting away from liberty. Using 87 indicators of personal and economic freedom, the annual index found that human freedom dropped sharply during the first two years of the COVID-19 pandemic, then increased somewhat in 2022 but remained flat in 2023, the most recent year for which comprehensive data are available. The authors—Cato’s Ian Vásquez, the Fraser Institute’s Matthew D. Mitchell, Southern Methodist University’s Ryan Murphy, and data scientist Guillermina Sutter Schneider—profiled 165 countries and found that freedom has declined for 90 percent of the world’s population since 2019. The index, copublished by Cato and Fraser, also shows that freedom is strongly related to per capita income and other measures of human well-being such as tolerance and life expectancy.

RECENT CATO STUDIES

**The ROAD to More Federal Control: How Congress Is Misdiagnosing America’s Housing Problems**

*By Norbert Michel and Jerome Famularo*

**Steeled for Protectionism**

*By Clark Packard and Alfredo Carrillo Obregon*

**Their Own Two Feet: How Europeans Can Lead on Conventional Deterrence in Europe**

*By Benjamin Giltner*

**Licensing Requirements Would Block Care and Justice for Sexual Assault Victims**

*By Jeffrey A. Singer, Akiva Malamet, Spencer Pratt, and Michael F. Cannon*

**The \$15 Trillion Emergency Spending Loophole**

*By Dominik Lett*

**Ending Community Development Subsidies**

*By Chris Edwards*

**Understanding Debanking: Evaluating Governmental, Operational, Political, and Religious Financial Account Closures**

*By Nicholas Anthony*

**New Poll: Most Americans Expect Social Security Benefit Cuts; a Third Believe the Program Won’t Exist When They Retire**

*By Emily Ekins and Hunter Johnson*



View the latest books and studies at [Cato.org/pubs](https://Cato.org/pubs) or scan the QR code.

# The Future of Freedom Starts with a Vision

Cato’s Vision for Liberty is driving change—one principle, one policy, one generation at a time. Through rigorous research, policy solutions, and cutting-edge content, we’re raising Cato’s voice to bring more people to liberty—now and for future generations.

## THE IMPACT OF YOUR INVESTMENT

- **Advance Ideas That Drive Change:** Recruit top scholars in executive power, trade, technology, and human progress—delivering the principled analysis policymakers demand
- **Equip Future Generations:** Reach millions more students and thousands more teachers through rapidly expanding education programs—building the next generation of liberty-minded leaders
- **Bring Liberty to Life:** Secure Cato’s position as the go-to media source for principled, nonpartisan analysis—amplifying our scholars’ voices to millions searching for alternatives



Donate now at [Cato.org/visionforliberty](https://Cato.org/visionforliberty) or scan the QR code to the left.

# Martin “Bud” Mattern’s Legacy of Independent Thought

By Josh Ferencik

When Martin “Bud” Mattern left nearly \$1 million to the Cato Institute in his estate plans, he was securing a future for the principles and ideas that guided his own life.

“No matter what happens in life, you’ll end up alone. So you better learn to like yourself.” That life lesson—delivered with the blunt honesty that Martin “Bud” Mattern’s friends and family knew so well—captures a man who had spent his life walking an independent intellectual path, long before he realized he wasn’t walking it alone.

Born in 1942 near Lake Winnebago, Wisconsin, Bud was the youngest of 13 children in a household that valued ideas, music, and philosophy. His father owned and operated a grocery store, and the family fostered an environment where deep thinking flourished. Even as a child, Bud stood apart—brilliant but quiet, he didn’t speak until he was two years old, as though he were carefully

considering his words before offering them to the world. That became his trademark: He spoke only in facts, and compliments from him were rare treasures because they came as unvarnished truth.

A true polymath, Bud taught himself piano and was an avid reader. But it was during his five-decade career at Abbott Laboratories that his libertarian instincts crystallized into conviction. Working in pharmaceuticals, Bud witnessed firsthand what he saw as the FDA’s regulatory overreach—rules set by bureaucrats who knew less than the scientists and manufacturers developing lifesaving treatments. To Bud, this raised fundamental questions beyond just bureaucratic meddling: Who should make decisions, and by what authority?



What made Bud remarkable was that he developed these libertarian principles independently during the mid-20th century, when the modern libertarian movement was still finding its voice.

Then, in the 1970s, Bud discovered *Reason* magazine, and through it the newly founded Cato Institute. For someone who had spent years thinking he might be alone in his worldview, finding Cato was like stumbling into a hidden valley of kindred spirits. “He liked knowing someone else was thinking like him,” recalls his sister Roseann. “He thought this way before he even knew what a libertarian was, and it was a breath of fresh air to find out other people thought about the world this way.”

Bud’s home became a shrine to these ideas, with shelves displaying his cherished collection of Cato books alongside works by Ayn Rand. His best friend, Ben, whom he met at Abbott, now maintains this extensive library—a testament to Bud’s belief that ideas represent humanity’s greatest treasures.

Bud knew that “what sounds good often is not what would work,” and he valued the Cato Institute precisely because he could rely on its experts to be honest, objective, and principled, even when the truth was inconvenient.

“We don’t know if you ever had an opportunity to know Bud, but his values were your values,” his brother James wrote to Cato after Bud’s passing in July of 2024. “Our family is grateful that he discovered your institute to reinforce his philosophy during difficult times. You were a solace to him and therefore to us.”

That solace has now become a lasting legacy through Bud’s nearly \$1 million unrestricted bequest. After decades of evaluating ideas with the same rigor he once applied to pharmaceutical research, Bud



concluded that Cato could be trusted to advance liberty wisely and effectively.

In leaving this gift unrestricted, Bud demonstrated the same independent thinking that defined his life. He didn’t attempt to micromanage from beyond or impose specific priorities. Instead, he offered the ultimate compliment: complete confidence in Cato’s judgment and mission.

For a man who believed you must learn to like yourself because you’ll end up alone, Bud Mattern’s final act ensures that his ideas—and the movement that gave them a home—will never walk alone.

Bud’s story is a reminder that the most powerful legacies are measured not only in dollars but also in the ideas they preserve and carry forward. If Cato’s work has given you that same sense of intellectual grounding, consider how a legacy gift might extend those ideas to generations still searching for their own path to liberty.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Josh Ferencik, the associate director of development at Cato, is responsible for expanding the Institute’s community of supporters in the Northeast and Midwest.



Scan the QR code to learn how to create your legacy for liberty.

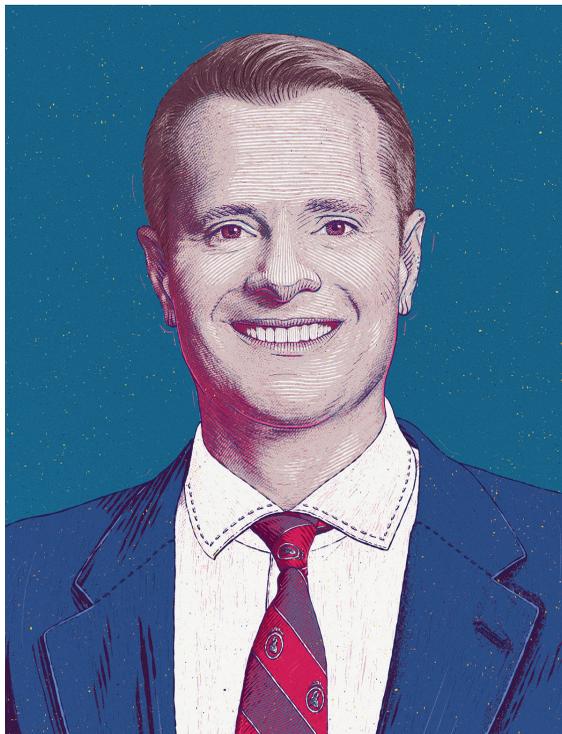


ILLUSTRATION BY BARTOSZ KOSOWSKI

## Last Word: A Cure for the “Everything Sucks” Epidemic

By Marian L. Tupy

As if the COVID-19 pandemic and the concomitant screwups by the US government were not enough to make one despair about the future of America, a curious new virus is spreading across the fruited plains. The “everything sucks” epidemic has infected parts of the right, which dropped Ronald Reagan’s “shining city upon a hill” vision of the United States in favor of the, I kid you not, theocracy and feudalism of the Middle Ages. Meanwhile, the virus has further compromised the already weakened cognition of the far left, which is now openly trying to resuscitate the 100-percent-failure-rate socialism that scarred much of the globe during the last century.

This negativity emotion contagion, as George Mason University economist Tyler Cowen and I agreed in a recent podcast (you really should subscribe to Human Progress), is likely driven by America’s hypercompetitive media landscape, which battles for eyeballs by focusing on the bad news and putting the worst spin on it. “If it bleeds, it leads,” goes the journalistic saying, and true to form, the emotional valence of the news, research shows, has been growing darker since 1945.

Blaming the media is often deserved, as well as pleasant and easy. It is also trite. The problem goes much deeper, for it rests in our innate propensity to overindulge on bad news. Prioritization of threats made a lot of sense when our hunter-gathering ancestors chased the mastodon while being chased by hungry lions and headhunters from enemy tribes, often at the same time. It makes little sense now that we live in the most prosperous and peaceful society on which the sun ever cast its rays. Alas, our modern skulls house Stone Age minds, as evolutionary psychologists remind us.

(Thankfully, we have just hired one of them, Adam Omary, a Harvard PhD no less, to help us figure these things out.)

There are at least two problems with the new virus. The first is that the “everything sucks” America is often disconnected from the facts that are easily obtainable to anyone interested in, you know, reality. US life expectancy is at an all-time high. The same is true of the real—which is to say, inflation-adjusted—median personal income. Recent inflation has eroded some of our purchasing power, but the long-term trend, as shown in the American Abundance Index that Cato adjunct scholar Gale Pooley and I launched in January, points to continued growth in affordability.

**“Let us not be disheartened. America has seen much darker days in the past, and the country’s capacity for course correction and regeneration is unparalleled.”**

The country has its problems. Few people trust in America’s governing institutions, but that is unlikely to improve if, per Tucker Carlson’s and Curtis Yarvin’s suggestion, we return to having an absolute monarch. Housing, the new construction of which is inhibited by regulations, and higher education and health care costs, which are elevated by subsidies, are unlikely to

become more affordable if New York City Mayor Zohran Mamdani and his ilk get their way. Put differently, the fixes for America’s ills offered by right-wing and left-wing reactionaries have been tried and tested and were found wanting.

The second problem is that an “everything sucks” attitude could easily turn into a “burn it all down” approach, as exemplified by such fringe groups as antifa on the left and the Proud Boys on the right. Ignorance of history, the degree of which is staggering given our ability to access almost all human knowledge via supercomputers in our pockets, makes far too many Americans think that out of the ashes of the old and imperfect regime something better must emerge, phoenix-like. That’s just silly. The American Revolution was unique in its success. The French, Russian, Chinese, Cuban, and Iranian Revolutions were much more normal in their failure.

As classical liberals and libertarians, we understand that no political or economic system is perfect. “Out of the crooked timber of humanity,” Immanuel Kant wrote, “no straight thing was ever made.” That said, let us not be disheartened. America has seen much darker days in the past, and the country’s capacity for course correction and regeneration is unparalleled. With your help, we will continue in our mission of promoting changes that will, if implemented, make the next 250 years of American history even better than the last quarter of a millennium, crooked timber and all. ♦

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Marian L. Tupy is the founder and editor of HumanProgress.org, a senior fellow at the Cato Institute’s Center for Global Liberty and Prosperity, and the coauthor of *Superabundance*.

# FreeSociety

Winter 2026

## Editors

**Audrey Grayson** Editor in Chief

**Paul Best** Managing Editor

## Contributing Editors

**Aaron Steelman** Senior Fellow and Policy Advisor

**Ashley Mason** Senior Copyeditor

## Contributing Writer

**Joshua Hardman** Development

Communications Manager

## Art Direction

**Jon Meyers** Art Director

**Mai Makled** Senior Graphic Designer

## Editorial Board

**Maria Santos Bier** Director, Foundation and  
Corporate Relations

**Jonathan Fortier** Director, Libertarianism.org

**Peter Goettler** President and CEO

**Scott Lincicome** Vice President, General Economics  
and the Herbert A. Stiefel Center for Trade Policy  
Studies

**Harrison Moar** Senior Vice President, Marketing and  
Partnerships

**Clark Neily** Senior Vice President, Legal Studies

**Johan Norberg** Senior Fellow

**Alex Nowrasteh** Senior Vice President, Policy

**Aaron Steelman** Senior Fellow and Policy Advisor

## Cato Institute

**Peter Goettler** President and CEO

**James M. Lapeyre Jr.** Chairman

**Linda Ah-Sue** Vice President, Events  
and Conferences

**Marissa Delgado** Vice President, Chief  
Financial Officer

**Emily Ekins** Vice President, Director  
of Polling

**Steve Kurtz** Vice President, Chief Data  
and AI Officer

**Scott Lincicome** Vice President, General  
Economics and the Herbert A. Stiefel  
Center for Trade Policy Studies

**Norbert Michel** Vice President, Director  
of the Center for Monetary and Financial  
Alternatives

**Jeffrey Miron** Vice President, Research

**Harrison Moar** Senior Vice President,  
Marketing and Partnerships

**Lawrence Montreuil** Vice President,  
Public Affairs

**Clark Neily** Senior Vice President,  
Legal Studies

**Alex Nowrasteh** Senior Vice President,  
Policy

**Ian Vásquez** Vice President, International  
Studies, David Boaz Chair, and Director  
of the Center for Global Liberty and  
Prosperity

“

**There is only one basic human right, the right to do as you damn well please. And with it comes the only basic human duty, the duty to take the consequences.**

”

— P. J. O'Rourke

“The Liberty Manifesto,” a speech  
at the Cato Institute on May 6, 1993

Free Society is a quarterly magazine published by the  
Cato Institute and sent to all contributors. (ISSN: 2770-6885.)  
©2026 by the Cato Institute.

Correspondence should be addressed to  
Free Society, 1000 Massachusetts Ave. NW, Washington, DC 20001.  
www.cato.org/freesociety • 202-842-0200

