

Letter from the President, Peter Goettler

"What you're trying to do—to limit government, to make it smaller—isn't it impossible? It seems like everyone wants bigger government."

These weren't the words of an ideological opponent, but an ally. The words of a generous and longstanding Cato Partner, in fact. He was being provocative. He was challenging us. He was pushing to understand how the Cato community maintains the energy and motivation to persist in our mission to defend and expand liberty.

This isn't exactly something I hadn't thought about before, so my response was quick: "What's the alternative . . . give up? We're fighting for the free future our children and grandchildren deserve. And if we fail, at least my kids will know we went down swinging."

We'd be naive not to recognize the enormity of our task. Consider the advent of entitlement and public assistance programs. It's the Achilles' heel of democracy when people realize the national treasury can be plundered to take money from one person and give it to another.

When that happens, an equilibrium is erased and the brakes come off. Politicians relentlessly tell Americans what tough lives they have, and how the political class will fix it by giving them this or that. The citizenry becomes habituated to turning to the state for subsidies. The costs are largely hidden by spreading them across millions of taxpayers, obscured by the myth that fiscal sustainability will be at hand if only the rich pay their "fair share," or pushed onto voiceless future generations. This is Frédéric Bastiat's "*grande fiction*": The state is the myth that everyone can live at someone else's expense.

High spending, mountains of debt, and unsustainable deficits are only the financial impact. Becoming conditioned to look to government for assistance is the acid that dissolves the ties of family and community, mutual aid and charitable societies, social capital, and civil society generally. And it's quite likely that the spiritual effects on individuals—undermining thrift, self-reliance, individual responsibility, and liberty—are even greater.

These consequences alone could sink our country and the economic well-being of our progeny. But it's only the tip of the iceberg. Those running for and holding office claim many other ways to help and protect us that don't involve money, but rather the exercise of government coercion and the surrender of more freedom.

Yes, what we're trying to do together is hard. And especially at times like this—with one party turning away from free markets and capitalism, and the other moving ever farther away from them—it might seem impossible.

But it's not impossible.

Is what we have to do more difficult than what the Founders set out to achieve—and accomplished beyond their wildest dreams—250 years ago? I submit that it's not. And we know that what they did, however improbable, was not impossible. Because they did accomplish it.

I am optimistic about the triumph of liberty in the very long term. We need only look around us to see clearly that petitioning government for favors does not make people happy or fulfilled, or their lives meaningful. Ultimately, people will want to be free. The temptations of the *grande fiction* are powerful in the short run, but over time will only deliver emptiness.

Liberty works. It delivers prosperity, meaningful and contented lives, and social harmony. And in the long run, it will win.

I recall that at the Cato Club Retreat I attended in 2012, Charles Murray also gave us reason to be optimistic in the long run. He said that if we keep per capita income growing—a prospect that's not inevitable, but achievable—the compounding of that income over several generations will leave everyone wealthy enough to decide that they simply don't want bureaucrats pushing them around and trying to run their lives.

But the ultimate triumph of liberty over generations doesn't mean that freedom can't go into serious retreat in the short run. Reaching a golden age for liberty in, say, 150 years doesn't mean the next 40 or 50 years couldn't be a dark age for liberty.

Our efforts are critical. Because I won't know anyone alive in 150 years. But the lives of the people I know today—and the people I love today—will depend on the course of liberty over the next decades. Which is why we'll do everything we can to ward off liberty's dark age and to accelerate its golden age. And, like the Founders, we can make it possible.



Peter Goettler
President and CEO