

What Do You Know About Freedom?

By Fred E. Foldvary

Most folks, if asked, say they favor a free society, but they don't know what freedom means. They vaguely favor being able to speak and move about freely, but when it comes to the crunch, they back off. They think that freedom means being able to do anything that they personally do not find displeasing. If they deem marijuana to be disagreeable, they think freedom excludes the legal right to grow and use marijuana. To them, freedom means, "you may do what you like as long as I think it's OK." But that is no freedom.

In his second inaugural address on January 20, 2005, President Bush declared, "The survival of liberty in our land increasingly depends on the success of liberty in other lands. The best hope for peace in our world is the expansion of freedom in all the world... America, in this young century, proclaims liberty throughout all the world, and to all the inhabitants thereof."

Echoing the words of the Bible, this declaration by President Bush is noble, grand, and beautiful. But has the U.S. federal government been true to this ideal? The test of freedom is when it is applied to situations that displease you. And here, the chiefs of government have shown that they do not understand freedom. Government officials know very little about freedom.

On January 15, 2005, the Associated Press reported that the Public Broadcasting System (PBS) had edited a scene in "Dirty War," a movie about a fictional terrorist attack on London. PBS edited out a scene showing the front side of a nude woman being scrubbed down after the "dirty bomb" attack. PBS will show the movie on February 23. A PBS senior programming executive said that PBS was editing out the nudity because the Federal Communications Commission is aggressively acting against "indecent" in television. The cable channel HBO will include the nude scene when it shows the movie starting January 24.

The U.S. federal government banned nudity in 2004 when it fined CBS \$550,000 for briefly showing the exposure of part of Janet Jackson's breast during the Super Bowl halftime performance. PBS is editing out nudity in other shows, such as in a documentary on Auschwitz, in which PBS blurred the image of a naked man about to enter a gas chamber, an image viewed unaltered when the program was broadcast in Europe.

Prior to the Bush presidency, there was no federal law against nudity, either in broadcasting or even physically by persons. The First Amendment is supposed to guarantee freedom of speech, including visual expression. Moreover, anti-nudity legislation is constitutionally part of the criminal code of the states and the ordinances of local government. But more and more criminal law has become unconstitutionally federalized as government in the USA gets increasingly centralized. The first federal ban on nudity on television was made by Federal Communications Commission Chairman Michael Powell, with his huge fines for broadcasted "indecenty."

Chief Powell was in part responding to complaints by viewers. But true freedom is not decided by voting. If the law is based on what folks don't like, then we have the rule of whim rather than the rule of liberty. True freedom means that all acts, and only those acts, which coercively and invasively harm others, are prohibited and penalized. Acts or situations which merely offend people, but do not destroy or steal their property, are not prohibited, even these are displeasing to a majority. Nudity is a prime example of something that may be offensive, but is not a harm.

The real reason for the federal nudity ban is political. The President is supported by religious conservatives, and he needs to provide these supporters with some benefit in return. Religious conservatives have been rewarded with the privilege of having their social conservatism enforced by law, contrary to true liberty. Religious conservatives either don't understand freedom or else don't agree with it, since they seek to impose their particular values on all society. But there is a deeper problem with religious conservatism, a big contradiction.

Christian fundamentalists believe that human beings were divinely created in the image of God. But many religious fundamentalists also believe that some parts of the human body are inherently indecent and evil. They therefore believe that, verily, verily, God is good, and, verily, God hath created the human body, but, since the body is, to them, evil, God created something indecent, yea even pornographic. These Christian fundamentalists must thus believe that God is a pornographer, since God created a body that is evil to view. This is a logical contradiction, since according to the Bible, after creating man, God said this was very good. Of course religious folks should be free to believe whatever illogic they wish, but the problem is that these religious conservatives seek to impose this logical contradiction on all society by force.

If most Americans wish to ban nudity, as well as banning drugs, gambling, and working without a government license or paying tribute to government, they should admit that they do not really favor freedom. So be it if peaceful and honest acts are to be prohibited and taxed, but don't call it freedom or liberty. Be honest! Confess that you oppose freedom! Confess also that you are violating the Commandments, because you are stealing our liberty.

President Bush says he wants to free the world. He says he seeks to protect American liberty. But the actions of his FCC chief shows that the Bush administration does not understand freedom. When they ban medical marijuana, forcing suffering cancer victims to endure pain and death, it shows how little they know about freedom.

And you? What do you know about freedom? And what are you going to do about it?

-- Fred Foldvary

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