

# Rights Versus Entitlements

by Steven Yates

Many people today speak of rights. We hear of rights not just to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, but to a host of other things as well, including rights to employment, education, a certain level of income, a certain quality of housing, race and gender representation in the workplace, freedom from economic insecurity, and health care. Often these claims are made on behalf of some group; thus we hear of women's rights, the rights of minorities *qua* minorities, the rights of gays and lesbians, the elderly, children, the handicapped, and sometimes even the rights of animals. Usually a careful appraisal of what the advocates for these various groups are saying indicates their belief that their rights can be fulfilled only by acts of government. Hence they petition the government for new laws or other favors.

If we consider the original rights expressed in the Declaration of Independence and enumerated in the U.S. Constitution, it should be clear that there are massive differences between those rights and these new ones. The original rights were rights to live by one's personal efforts without the interference of others, and in particular, without interference by government. That is what

---

*Dr. Yates is a Visiting Assistant Professor, Department of Philosophy, University of South Carolina, Academic Year 1993-94; Salvatori Fellow, The Heritage Foundation, 1992-94; and author of Civil Wrongs: What Went Wrong With Affirmative Action (San Francisco: ICS Press, 1994) and recent articles and reviews in Public Affairs Quarterly, Social Sciences Quarterly, Reason Papers, IPI Insights, and other periodicals.*

the founders of the United States were declaring independence from, after all. The Declaration of Independence speaks of the right to *pursue* happiness; it does not offer a guarantee that one will *achieve* happiness. This makes all the difference in the world; for in a free society there can be no guarantee that effort will meet with success.

Nevertheless, today we see plenty of demand for such guarantees, and more and more promises being made by government in response to these demands. Take the minimum wage. What this "right" does is force an employer to pay a higher wage than employees' services might be worth under free market conditions. Or consider the "rights" to access now mandated by the Americans With Disabilities Act. This legislation requires businesses and other organizations to make extra-economic accommodations but does not clearly spell out what they have to do to comply. Such ambiguity is another characteristic of many recently discovered "rights."

Given the vast differences between what is stated in this country's founding documents and the demands we now see, accuracy and honesty call for a different term than *rights*. The term *entitlements* crept into our political and socioeconomic lexicon to refer to federal programs such as Social Security and Medicare. It is notable that the decision to partake of the fruits of these programs was not left up to the individual. By law, he had to participate, and this meant relinquishing an important aspect of freedom. Moreover, entitlements are always

financed by compelling others to pay. Thus, they lead to more and more interference with individual freedom as government grows in size to administer its programs, seizing the fruits of individuals' actions both to support itself and to fulfill its entitlement guarantees.

In other words, there is a hard and fast difference between *rights* and *entitlements*, a difference which the past seventy years of government policy has blurred to the point of indistinguishability. A free society must recognize the distinction. Otherwise, it has no way of knowing which claims of rights to acknowledge and which to reject as spurious. Legitimate rights are easy to recognize. They can be acted on by individuals without the assistance of government and without forcibly interfering with other individuals. Entitlements, on the other hand, cannot be fulfilled *except* through specific government actions which require forcible interference with others. Protecting rights is thus compatible with limited government. Granting entitlements requires an ever-expanding and increasingly meddlesome state. The more entitlements the state grants, the more it must extend itself to make good on its promises, and the greater its level of interference with people's actions. Moreover, by interfering with successful actions, government becomes a drain on the individual's energies. The individual must expend more and more effort to get the same personal

benefits. This translates into a disincentive to produce, and when less is produced, there is less to seize and distribute. Soon, the state can no longer keep its promises.

Today, government sees itself as in the business of providing guarantees in the form of entitlements; new, spurious "rights" such as those named at the outset are manufactured by the hundreds of pages of new legislation our government churns out every day. A government which knows its place, however, will shun entitlements. Attempts to provide guarantees to citizens, no matter how well intentioned or how well orchestrated, cannot be made without introducing more and more interferences with genuine rights as the government grows exponentially in order to administer the programs.

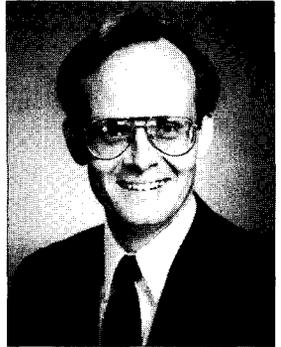
The government that sees itself as in the business of fulfilling entitlements soon finds itself under pressure to grant more and more. Then, faced with burgeoning bureaucracy, declining opportunities, declining prosperity, and a general malaise, it soon finds that it cannot grant anything worthwhile at all. Today's entitlement-granting machine is leading the country into the economic equivalent of a bottomless pit. Only time will tell if we can reverse the process by recovering the distinction between rights and entitlements and redefining the purpose of government as protector of the former, not guarantor of the latter. □

## Help Wanted: Interns and Volunteers

The Foundation for Economic Education invites applications for a few positions as interns (male or female) who will live at FEE headquarters, studying the freedom philosophy, learning to publish a celebrated journal and great books, and preparing for advanced degrees. Small stipends will cover living expenses.

The Foundation also invites dedicated men and women of all ages and vocations to lend a helping hand in the service of a noble cause. It needs accountants and librarians, computer operators and repairmen, salesmen and mailmen, and many others.

## America's Economics Knowledge Deficit



**E**conomics is a subject that dominates public life and important policy discussions these days, but those Americans who rely on what they've learned of it in the public schools are entering the intellectual battle unarmed.

According to an informal survey in my state of Michigan, 72 percent of the state's high schools offer economics. But of those, 51 percent make it a required course while 49 percent offer it as an "elective." Only a tiny fraction of students choose to take the subject when the choice is up to them. Barely 49 percent of Michigan students had actually completed one economics course before graduation in 1992.

The survey involved no value judgments regarding the kind of economics taught. Some courses deal with little more than "consumer" issues: how to balance a checkbook, how to find the best deals in the market, or how to borrow money at the lowest interest rate. Those are all useful things to know, but the mental tools and essential principles needed to analyze and evaluate the paramount issues of the day are too often missing.

Moreover, even a cursory examination of textbooks used in high school economics courses reveals a dismal level of understanding or outright bias by the text authors

themselves. Students are sometimes reading, for instance, that Americans are under-taxed, that government spending creates new wealth, and that politicians are better long-term planners than private entrepreneurs. It is not uncommon for texts to portray free market competition and private property in a suspicious light while presenting government intervention with little or no critical scrutiny. It therefore may actually be a blessing rather than a curse that so few students are exposed to what passes these days in the schools as "economics."

Stripped of bias, the study of economics is immensely important. Indeed, without it we miss an understanding of much of what makes us the unique, thinking creatures we are. Economics is the study of human action in a world of limited resources and unlimited wants—a lively topic that cannot be reduced to lifeless graphs and mind-numbing equations that occupy the pretentious planner's time.

### What Economics Teaches

Economics teaches us that everything of value has a cost. It informs us that higher standards of living can only come about through greater production. It tells us that nations become wealthy not by printing money or spending it, but through capital accumulation and the creation of goods and services. It tells us that supply and demand are harmonized by the signals we call prices and that political attempts to

---

*Lawrence W. Reed, economist and author, is President of The Mackinac Center for Public Policy, a free market research and educational organization headquartered in Midland, Michigan.*