

IDEAS ON LIBERTY

OCTOBER 2003

Joseph P. Overton: Character for a Free Society



A person's character is nothing more and nothing less than the sum of his choices. You can't choose your height or race or many other physical traits, but you fine-tune your character every time you distinguish right from wrong and act accordingly. Your character is further defined by how you choose to interact with others and the standards of speech and conduct you uphold.

Ravaged by conflict and corruption, the world is starving these days for people of *high* character. Indeed, as much as anything, it is on this issue that the fate of individual liberty has always depended. A free society flourishes when people seek to be models of honor, honesty, and propriety. It descends into barbarism when they abandon what's right in favor of self-gratification at the expense of others, when lying, cheating, or stealing are winked at instead of shunned. Those who favor the steady advance of liberty must assign top priority to raising the caliber of their own character and learning from those who already have it in spades.

So it is good news for liberty when anyone, anywhere, commits his life to the loftiest standards of personal and professional behavior. It's bad news when we lose such models, and it is with profound sadness that I share some bad news with readers of this journal. The world's sum of good character suffered an incalculable subtraction with the

untimely death on June 30 of a friend and colleague, Joseph P. Overton. Killed in a tragic plane crash at the age of 43, barely three months after making his vows to the woman of his dreams at a picture-perfect wedding, he will be remembered by many lovers of liberty around the world as a man who displayed the highest character in every way.

Since his college days Joe believed that liberty and character were mutually dependent and he felt an irresistible calling to work for the advancement of both. He reached the zenith of his contributions as senior vice president at the Mackinac Center for Public Policy in Michigan, whose staff he joined in January 1992. You cannot walk an inch in our 23,000-square-foot headquarters without seeing his imprint—in the output of our organization to the very building itself, whose construction he supervised in 1997.

Talk to any one of our nearly 30 employees and you'll hear the same: Through his example, his mere presence in a room would raise everyone's standards of speech and conduct. As a consummate administrator he taught us the importance of continuous organizational improvement through Total Quality Management. He was able to do that effectively not just because he knew the nuts and bolts of the subject, but because he practiced it in his personal life as well. I heard him say many times, "You cannot impart what you don't possess."

Joe Overton was the straightest straight shooter I've ever known. Not a speck of deception, guile, conceit, or hidden agenda

Lawrence Reed (Reed@mackinac.org) is president of the Mackinac Center for Public Policy (www.mackinac.org), a free-market research and educational organization in Midland, Michigan.

in him. He said what he meant and meant what he said, *always*. You never, *ever* had to wonder if he was telling you the truth. He kept his word as if it was an indispensable and inseparable physical appendage like an arm or a leg. Like so many others, I came to place total, unqualified trust in him. So did others who came to know him. Never underestimate the importance of truth and trust to a free society; if we cannot deal with each other on those terms, we will resort to the ugliness of brute force and political power.

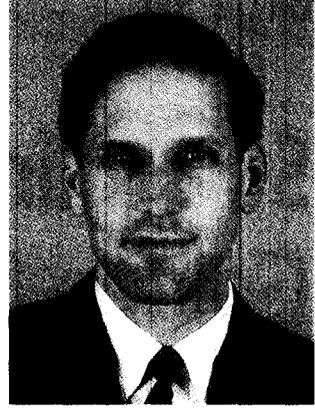
Though packed into a few amazingly productive years, Joe's contributions to the international freedom movement were legion. He was known as a leader in the effort to liberate parents and children from the grip of the government school monopoly, and he designed a unique tax-credit plan to move things in that direction. He devised winning strategies to liberate workers from compulsory unionism. And he created what is becoming known as the "Overton Window of Political Possibilities"—a teaching tool that gets people to understand the importance of putting ideas ahead of political action.

Practiced as Well as Preached

Over and over again, people were attracted to his work because of the sterling character of his persona. Friends marveled at his consistency and self-discipline. They were impressed that he not only preached the virtues of civil society, he practiced them in his own life through endless volunteer efforts, quiet philanthropy, and ceaseless counsel to those who needed good advice. All of this comes through loud and clear in the hundreds of tributes to him that poured in from all over the world in the two weeks after the accident that claimed his life. As a testimony to his far-flung influence, within days of the tragedy a Joseph P. Overton Leadership Center was announced in Nairobi, Kenya, for the purpose of training African youth in the principles of liberty

and how best to advance them. You can see just how special Joe was by viewing the many tributes at www.mackinac.org.

So much more could be said of this great man, but, I close with this from one of the eulogies delivered at his funeral:



Joseph P. Overton

The world needs more men who do not have a price at which they can be bought; who do not borrow from integrity to pay for expediency; who have their priorities straight and in proper order; whose handshake is an ironclad contract; who are not afraid of taking risks to advance what is right; and who are honest in small matters as they are in large ones.

The world needs more men whose ambitions are big enough to include others; who know how to win with grace and lose with dignity; who do not believe that shrewdness and cunning and ruthlessness are the three keys to success; who still have friends they made twenty years ago; who put principle and consistency above politics or personal advancement; and who are not afraid to go against the grain of popular opinion.

The world needs more men who do not forsake what is right just to get consensus because it makes them look good; who know how important it is to lead by example, not by barking orders; who would not have you do something they would not do themselves; who work to turn even the most adverse circumstances into opportunities to learn and improve; and who love even those who have done some injustice or unfairness to them. The world, in other words, needs more true leaders. More to the point, the world needs more Joe Overtons. □

Strangling the Golden State's Golden Goose

by Steven Greenhut

The older industrial park just south of downtown Los Angeles wasn't the typical spot for a California Chamber of Commerce press conference. There were no ribbons to cut, only a handful of moving boxes decorated with various bill numbers—SB 888, AB 274, SB 515. Instead of hand-shaking and excitement about a newly opened business, a group of assembled reporters and onlookers witnessed some sad speeches and eulogies, the likes of which one usually finds at funerals.

In some ways it was a funeral. Mitchell Greif, chairman of the plastic-bag manufacturing company Coast Converters Inc., was shutting his doors and heading to the Nevada desert, where the cost of business will plummet and where officials are welcoming his company rather than persecuting it.

"I do not want to leave California," Greif told the crowd. "But as a businessman I have no choice. If I stay in California I will be subject to more punitive taxes and fees that will eventually force me to cut jobs. Instead our workers are moving with the factory to Nevada where I will save \$800,000 annually in taxes, insurance, workers compensation, and onerous regulations."

"We've been legislated out of business," Kjeld Hestehave, president of Bomatic Inc., a plastics manufacturer in Ontario, California, added, as other company owners eagerly

Steven Greenhut (sgreenhut@ocregister.com) is a senior editorial writer and columnist for the Orange County Register in Santa Ana, California.

chimed in with their own horror stories. Four years ago, Hestehave said, he was among a group of five plastics manufacturers who met with their state assemblywoman to plead for regulatory relief. "I'm the last one left," he said. Soon enough he'll be gone too—to southern Utah.

It's simple economics. His workers-compensation premiums will go from \$300,000 a year to \$30,000 a year, and his electricity costs in this electricity-intensive industry will drop from about \$800,000 a year to \$80,000 a year. But it's not just the money.

"They [legislators] definitely don't want manufacturing in California," he added. "In Utah they want us there so bad. A building permit in California would have taken us months, but we'll get it passed in Utah in about one week." Many of the costliest regulations, business owners say, don't seem to benefit anyone.

It was the same story over and over. Last year California passed a paid-family-leave bill, creating a fund that gives workers time off with pay. Greif points to AB 60, which forces employees to be paid overtime based on daily hours rather than weekly hours. It cost his company \$130,000 in one year alone. He said his workers didn't even want the overtime changes, and voted not to implement them, although the state doesn't allow such personal choices.

What is this, some kind of free country where employers and employees can negotiate the terms of employment on their own?