

# Can Americans Remember the Virtue of Independence (and the Corrosiveness of Dependence)?

If this 4th of July you reflect on the future of liberty, you will not be alone. Many Americans believe [freedom is in decline](#). The Heritage Foundation's Index of Economic Freedom confirms the decline. Their [latest 2018 data](#) places the United States as only the 18<sup>th</sup> freest country in the world.

Are politicians to blame? Or, do the politicians we elect merely reflect shifting societal attitudes towards freedom? Collectively, do we lack a freedom mindset?

In 1787 Ben Franklin was the oldest delegate to the Constitutional convention. At the end of the last day of the convention, as Franklin left the hall, he was approached by Mrs. Powell of Philadelphia [who asked](#), "Well, doctor, what have we got, a republic or a monarchy?"

Franklin famously responded, "A republic, madam, if you can keep it."

The "you" Franklin was referring to was "we the people."

[In a letter Franklin wrote that same year he gave insight](#) as to what "we" would need to do to keep liberty: "Only a virtuous people are capable of freedom. As nations become corrupt and vicious, they have more need of masters."

Most people think themselves virtuous; it's other person who lack virtues. Freedom, we may think, is declining because of them, not us. Clearly, we can't all be right.

Many virtues help maintain freedom, beginning with keeping our word and honoring our contracts. Deceit corrodes liberty.

Essential to freedom is respect for the rights and property of others—our rights are only as strong as our respects for the rights of other.

In his book, [Wow, I'm An American](#), psychiatrist [Peter Breggin](#) argues that one of the most important virtues is taking responsibility for oneself and one's actions. Many say they love freedom, but professed love is not enough. Breggin writes:

“Human nature contains more than love of freedom and devotion to responsibility. Human nature has darker corners. Fear lurks in one terrifying corner and helplessness in another. Because human nature is imperfect, some people can always be whipped into hating and envying freedom and its wonderful rewards.”

Breggin imagines “a world made up of two different people with very different and conflicting ideas about themselves and their basic rights.”

To one type of person Breggin gives the name Dependence and to the other, Independence. Describing Dependence, he writes, “Dependence doesn't think he can earn enough money to pay for what he needs and wants, such as food, shelter, medical care, education, and retirement. He wants the government to provide these things for him.”

Dependence thinks life is unfair, and he wants government to “make up for this unfairness.” Dependence thinks he has a “right” to the “good life.”

On the other hand, Breggin explains, Independence wants government “to protect his freedom to take care of himself.”

Independence is “up to the challenge” of providing for himself and his loved ones. Breggin writes, “He believes that he has a right to take responsibility for himself and to keep most of his earnings for himself and his family.”

Breggin is not advocating a dog eat dog world. He understands that individuals fall on hard times and advocates for voluntary charity and volunteer work. Breggin argues that when we help those in need through government, most of our tax money "is wasted or gobbled up by the government and its interest groups." Administrative costs are very high for government charity.

Another corrosive effect of government charity is observed by Breggin:

"People like Dependence who do not like to take responsibility for themselves almost never give thanks for what they receive. People who wrangle favors out of other people, who get handouts, and who live off others almost always feel entitled rather than grateful. Without lifting a hand to get what they want, they nonetheless feel as if they deserve everything they get – and more. Indeed, they typically feel resentful towards the people who openly provide for them."

Is behaving like Dependence consistent with the best in human beings? Breggin says no. He writes, "I believe there is a core in every one of us that knows we should take responsibility and do what's right. When we act in accordance with our true or best nature we feel good about ourselves." In other words, the default setting in human beings, our true nature, is to be responsible.

When help is received, why does Dependence feel resentment instead of gratitude? Breggin explains,

"Irresponsible people know they are offending their own true or best nature. They sense they are taking advantage of others. They are sunk into an unethical condition in which they cannot feel comfortable with themselves. They feel ashamed of themselves and they resent responsible people whose lives remind them about their own spiritually sorry condition."

Breggin's indictment is powerful and far from politically correct. Government charity encourages an ungrateful, entitled mindset and a "spiritually sorry condition." In this condition, we hide from our true nature.

To be sure, it is not just individuals who assume the persona of Dependence. It is all too common for firms to lobby government asking for subsidies and special protections from competition.

Just as dependent individuals eschew responsibility and run from their true nature, firms seeking protection from government destroy the true nature of capitalism.

Would Franklin say, *I told you so*? Is declining virtue the cause of America's declining freedom? Have we met the enemy and the enemy is us?

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