

**IDEAS  
ON LIBERTY**  
JULY 2000



## Silly Talking

Let's talk about absolutely ridiculous pronouncements people make that either ignore simple fact or border on insanity. How about this one: Violence is no way to settle anything! Evidence suggests that violence is a very effective way of settling things. Let's look at a few examples. In 1776, violence settled whether the 13 colonies would be independent or remain under King George's thumb. In 1865, violence settled whether there'd be a Confederacy and a Union or just a Union. Between 1941 and 1945, violence settled whether Japan would control the Far East and whether Germany would control Europe. Violence settled whether American Indians owned and controlled the land now called United States or whether it would be European settlers and their progeny. In fact, violence has settled the question of land use-rights virtually everywhere.

Violence and the threat of violence not only settles questions of land use; it settles other matters as well. For example, I have no problem with paying for the constitutionally mandated functions of the federal government—those enumerated in the U.S. Constitution. But I disagree with my earnings being given to dependent farmers, failing banks, and poor people. Who has use-rights to my earnings is settled through threats, intimidation, and violence. The U.S. Congress in essence tells me,

---

*Walter Williams is the John M. Olin Distinguished Professor of Economics and chairman of the economics department at George Mason University in Fairfax, Virginia.*

“Williams, if you do not permit us to give your earnings to dependent farmers, banks, poor people, and anyone else we deem worthy of your earnings, we will use violence to take your earnings and anything else you possess.”

Some readers might think that I am being overly hyperbolic. What do you think would be the outcome of the following scenario? I write on my IRS 1040 form: “I gladly accept my responsibility to pay my share of constitutionally mandated functions of the federal government. That share comes to about one-third of what you say I owe. I will not pay for activities not authorized by the Constitution.” What happens? The IRS, the agent of the U.S. Congress, levies a fine and demands that I pay all they say I owe. I refuse. Then the IRS says, “We’re going to confiscate your house.” I say, “No you won’t; that’s my house.” Then they send agents with automatic weapons to take my house. I stand and defend my house. The agents of the U.S. Congress kill me.

The truth of the matter is that violence is such an effective and valuable means of settling differences that most governments demand to have a monopoly on its use.

## Profiting from Misfortune

Then there’s the asinine suggestion: it’s wrong to profit from the misfortune of others. We can easily see how silly that suggestion is by considering what would be the effects of outlawing profiting from the misfortune of others. For example, people often experience the misfortune of breaking an arm or a leg

skiing. Orthopedic surgeons who fix broken bones clearly profit from the misfortune of others. I bet automobile collision repair shop owners lick their chops at the news of an impending icestorm. Why? Because they anticipate auto collisions and the prospect of profiting from the misfortunes of others. As an economics professor, I profit from the misfortune that some people are ignorant of economics. So, what do you think? Should we or shouldn't we outlaw profiting from the misfortune of others?

Then there's the pious, grossly stupid pronouncement: when property rights conflict with human rights, property rights should yield to human rights. First, let's agree that property has no rights. For example, the computer I'm using to write this essay has no rights; neither does the chair I'm sitting on, nor the land on which my house is built. Only humans have rights. Among these rights are rights to property. I have rights to use my computer, chair, house, and land in any manner I wish so long as that use does not violate the rights of others.

"Rights" is a term that's fallen into hare-brained usage. How many times do we hear people, particularly politicians, speak of: rights to decent housing, rights to medical care, or rights to education? These are not rights, at least not in the normal usage of the term. Rights are something that exist simultaneously among people. Moreover, rights impose no positive burden on another. For example, my rights to freedom of speech and

freedom of movement exist simultaneously with your rights to the same. The exercise of my rights to free speech and movement in no way diminishes your rights to the same and imposes no burden on you except that of non-interference.

On the other hand, if it is said that I have a right to decent housing, whether I can afford it or not, since there's no Santa Claus or Tooth Fairy to give it to me, that "right" imposes a burden on you and other people in the form of taxes to pay for it. Thus, my "right" to a decent house, or anything else that I have not earned, means that someone else must have less housing or reduced rights to something that he has earned. Applying this hare-brained notion of "rights" to free-speech rights and freedom of movement would mean that for me to enjoy the right to free speech requires that you pay for the microphone, radio and television, or auditorium to enable me to speak out. My right to free movement would require that you pay my airfare and moving expenses.

A far more appropriate term for "rights" to decent housing, health care, or education is "wishes." If we used the term "wishes" instead of "rights," I would be in solid agreement with most other Americans for I too wish that everyone had a decent house, good health care, and a good education.

John Milton predicted, "When language in common use in any country becomes irregular and depraved, it is followed by their ruin and degradation." □