

The Washington Times

www.washingtontimes.com

Drifting from freedom

By Richard W. Rahn

THE WASHINGTON TIMES

Published January 30, 2005

Do you feel more or less free today than you did 10 years ago? If you happen to be a property developer, sit on the board of a public corporation, often travel by air, like to spend your own money supporting political candidates and causes you believe in, or are outspoken in your Christian beliefs, you almost certainly answered the above question, "Less free."

Our Founding Fathers and other political thinkers recognized that free peoples most often lose their freedoms not in one sudden blow, but by the endless erosion of liberties they once had. As a student in biology, you may have learned that if a frog is put in a pot of water slowly brought to a boil, the frog will not be aware of what is happening until it is too late. There is increasing evidence Americans, like the frog, are having their liberties slowly boiled away without realizing it.

Our very disturbing drift from freedom is reflected in the 2005 edition of the Index of Economic Freedom just published by the Heritage Foundation and the Wall Street Journal. A decade ago, the U.S. was rated as the fifth-freest economy, this year it has dropped out of the top 10 to No. 12 -- and we once were the role model for the world.

As the authors of the Index of Economic Freedom note, the good news is that the world in general is becoming freer and, as a result, economic growth and prosperity have increased over the globe. The bad news is the U.S. has wallowed in past successes and allowed its competitive advantage to erode.

The reason to care is not only that a loss of economic freedom means less personal liberty, but the findings of this and similar studies confirm the following statement of the authors: "The countries with the most economic freedom also have the higher rates of long-term economic growth and are more prosperous than are those with less economic freedom."

The U.S. is on a government taxing, spending and, most of all, regulating, binge that in the long run is incompatible with a free and prosperous society.

We now know poor societies can become prosperous within two generations as a result of free market economic policies coupled with the rule of law.

We also know rich societies can quickly become poor. Look at Argentina, which was the seventh-wealthiest country on the planet in the early 1900s.

Because of the socialist policies of the Peronists (i.e., excessive government spending and regulation, coupled with a decline in the rule of law) beginning in the 1930s, Argentina has become a poor country mired in crisis. Without a change in direction, the same fate eventually will befall the United States.

Not only is our economic freedom being eroded but also our freedom of speech, our freedom of religion and our rights of privacy and property. The McCain-Feingold Act curtailed our freedom of political speech. People engaging in "politically incorrect speech" are increasingly punished by college administrators, employers and by state and local officials (including judges), none of whom seem to have either read or understood what our Founding Fathers said they intended when they wrote the First Amendment.

Schoolchildren increasingly are penalized for bringing small symbols of their own religion to school. Anti-money laundering laws make it very difficult, if not almost impossible, for many of the young and the not well-established to open bank accounts.

If you happen to own a piece of land, whether you are a farmer, hunter, developer or just an ordinary homeowner, you are increasingly subject to an endless parade of local, state and federal officials -- and even nongovernmental public interest groups (a k a PIGS) telling you what you can and cannot do with your land. Landowners often are subject not only to laws or rules of what is and is not permitted, but to the arbitrary judgments and whims of various officials.

For thousands of years, it has been recognized people cannot be free if subject to the rule of an individual or collective rather than the rule of law. Yet even basic contract law has been made less definite in the last few decades by adding vague standards, such as "reasonable, timely and material."

Indeterminate sentencing assumes there is an appropriate sentence for each criminal as opposed to a sentence for a defined crime. Equal protection under the law has been twisted to mean unequal protection, depending on race, religion, sex (or sexual preference), weight, wealth, ethnic origin, parental and peer group influences, and political viewpoint.

Given there are almost limitless possible divisions of each of the above criteria, we are rapidly reaching a point where each individual will be subject to "law" applicable only to him or her.

Our freedoms are eroding because too many Americans fail to understand the consequences of encouraging the political class to try to protect us from all real and imagined ills -- whether it be a terrorist, a disease (including eating too much and aging), bad weather, a more efficient competitor, our own personal financial stupidity or irresponsibility, or a cigarette smoker.

Just remember: Every time you vote for a politician who promises to make the government do more for you, he also is saying that same government will make you less free and ultimately poorer.

Richard W. Rahn is a senior fellow of the Discovery Institute and an adjunct scholar of the Cato Institute.

Copyright © 2005 News World Communications, Inc. All rights reserved.