

**My Freedom
Depends on
Yours**

DEAN RUSSELL

EDITOR'S NOTE

This is the text of an address delivered at the Annual Meeting of the Public Utilities Association of the Virginias, September 18, 1953. Dean Russell, author of *The TVA Idea, Equality and Security*, and other books and pamphlets, is a Foundation staff member.

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MY FREEDOM DEPENDS ON YOURS



MY GRANDFATHER fought for freedom while he continued to own slaves. His concept of freedom permitted him to direct and control the activities of other men. And when he was denied the legal right to take for his own use the fruits of other people's labor, he was honestly convinced that his freedom had been curtailed to some extent.

An absurd concept of freedom? Well, he was no different in this respect from Jefferson, Washington, Patrick Henry, and others of our Founding Fathers. It is true that they had developed a better understanding of freedom than had any political group before them, and I respect them highly for their revolutionary and magnificent concepts of inalienable rights which come from God instead of government. But even so, they still believed that liberty permits some men to use violence to control the actions and to own the production of other men. Our Forefathers believed, of course, that these controls over other men should be permitted only if they were sanctioned by a government based on the democratic or republican processes. But

while rejecting the concept of hereditary rulers, they did not entirely reject the "Old World" idea that it is permissible for some persons to use the powers of government to aid them in controlling the actions and disposing of the production of other persons.

A discredited idea of freedom? Well, that same concept of freedom is still widely held throughout the United States today. The reasons advanced to defend the fact that some men have the authority to control the productive actions of other men have changed. And the modern way of taking and distributing the fruits of other people's labor is seldom called slavery. But the legal right of some men to control the productive activities of other men continues to exist as before. And the present-day tax of more than 80 per cent of some persons' incomes is probably a far greater percentage of their production than was ever withheld from any slave.

Is this present-day taking of other people's production legal? It is. But so was outright slavery once legal! Did that make it right? Let us hope that we Americans never delude ourselves into the belief that *right* is properly determined by a show of hands. For if we do, we are lost.

The extent and type of the legal controls over persons, and the degree of the taking of other people's production, have varied great-

ly throughout the history of the United States. But the overwhelming majority of the American people have always believed that freedom includes the right of some persons to use the legal authority of government to control the productive efforts and incomes of other persons.

Two Ideas of Liberty

ABRAHAM LINCOLN recognized this dilemma in 1864 when he stated: "The world has never had a good definition of the word liberty, and the American people, just now, are much in want of one. We all declare for liberty, but in using the same *word* we do not all mean the same *thing*. With some the word liberty may mean for each man to do as he pleases with himself, and the product of his labor; while with others the same word may mean for some men to do as they please with other men, and the product of other men's labor. Here are two, not only different, but incompatible things, called by the same name—liberty."

Both Lincoln and Jefferson Davis announced themselves for freedom. So did Stalin and Hitler. So do you and I and almost everyone else. And I have no reason to doubt that each is sincerely in favor of freedom—*his concept of freedom*.

Just as I hope you will give careful consideration to my ideas on freedom, just so will I be most pleased to give careful consideration to yours. For unless there is a common understanding of the meaning of freedom, we will continue to fight each other in its name.

Individual Freedom

IT SEEMS TO ME that much of the confusion over the meaning of liberty and freedom begins with an incomplete or inadequate explanation of what the phrase "individual freedom" really refers to.

While human freedom necessarily concerns the individual, it does so only in the sense that *freedom always refers to a relationship or condition between two or more persons*. While it is necessarily always individuals who understand, practice, and advance freedom, the concept applies only when there is some sort of contact between two or more of them. The *idea* of freedom would be useless to a person isolated forever from any contact with any other person. Contrasted with the ideas of food and shelter—which can be applied to one person alone—the idea of human freedom has no meaning except in society.

Reference to the concept of freedom, then, always applies to a condition or relationship between two or more persons. Just what is

that relationship? Certainly it would be nonsensical to describe freedom as a relationship of violence, where some persons are trying to impose their wills upon other persons. Probably the best word to describe that condition is tyranny.

Freedom Defined

Freedom is a relationship or condition of non-molestation. The word "molestation" is here used to include murder, defamation of character, theft, libel, fraud, violence or the threat of violence, or any other act of aggression by one person against another person's life, liberty, good name, or property. And the fact that the molestation may be legal—slavery, restrictions against trade, *compulsory* unionism, and so on—does not deny that freedom is infringed.

Since freedom describes a relationship of non-molestation *between persons*, it is misleading to speak of freedom as though it applies to one person alone. This is misleading because it is incomplete; because it refers to only part of a necessary relationship; because it tends to obscure the fact that one or more other persons are necessarily involved.

Yet, the idea of freedom is almost always used in the sense that *one individual* can be free and have his freedom, even though he

may be exercising legal authority over the productive activities and incomes of others—up to and including complete slavery. That seems to me an unfortunate concept of freedom. But such has always been the popular concept and still is.

Unrestrained Freedom

WHEN I speak of freedom, I mean a condition of *mutual* non-molestation, with no person molesting any other person. Under that concept, I fully endorse “unrestrained freedom”—a society based on the idea that no one has the right to molest anyone else; a society wherein everyone is legally forbidden to molest anyone else.

Now, I am aware that many millions of persons within our society do not share my faith in the principle of mutual non-molestation. And there seems little likelihood that the various types and degrees of molestation which now exist will disappear over night. But regardless of what others say or do, it is obvious that those of us who believe in *mutual* non-molestation must take the first and necessary step toward it by personally following the ideal of no molestation against others. There is no other way for freedom to begin except through its practice by individuals who understand what it is.

When Hitler spoke of freedom, he merely meant a condition in which no one molested him. His concept actually *required* that some of the German people molest others of the German people. The only condition that freedom described to Hitler was one wherein he could do as he pleased. To him, freedom was strictly a one-way street.

A Universal Idea

YOU SHOULDN'T be surprised at Hitler's concept of freedom. He didn't invent it and he had no monopoly upon it. It was, and is, held almost universally. As stated above, our Forefathers fought and died for freedom. And they were sincere about it. Yet, they did this while they themselves continued to violate freedom by controlling the productive activities and incomes of other persons.

The vast majority of our current state and federal officials believe sincerely in what they understand as freedom. Yet, so far as I know, few if any of them fully accept the idea of freedom as a reciprocal relationship of non-molestation among persons. On the contrary, most of them look upon freedom as a condition wherein some persons are *obligated* to molest other persons. The candidates of all political parties in our last elections said they believed sincerely in freedom. Yet almost all

of them endorsed specific issues that undeniably molest persons by forcing some to conform to the viewpoints and ideas of others.

Liberty and License

OUR LEGISLATORS are honorable men. They are sincerely trying to do what they consider to be a necessary and not-always-pleasant job. But I wonder if many of them are not confusing liberty and license.

In order better to understand the reason for this possible confusion, let us consider the following example: A person uses his own honestly acquired money to build a house for \$10,000. In the process, he molests no person or group of persons—neither defames them, defrauds them, breaks his voluntary contracts with them, nor uses violence or the threat of violence against them.

Upon completion of the house, the owner decides to offer it for rent. For a reason known only to himself, he sets a rental price of \$500 a month. At that price, the house stays vacant—even though there may be many persons who would like to live in the house at a rental price which would pay the owner a four or six or eight per cent return on his investment.

Would not the word “freedom” be the proper term to describe such a condition of

non-molestation wherein no person would be using violence or the threat of violence to impose his will or viewpoint upon any other person? Since no one would be forced to buy and no one would be forced to sell, would that not be freedom?

Most of our governmental officials, backed by the vast majority of the American people, would surely reply to that question somewhat as follows: "No! You have described a condition of license wherein the people would be robbed and exploited or forced to remain in substandard housing, wherein freedom would be destroyed. In order to restore freedom, we would have to molest such unreasonable property owners to the extent of forcing them to conform to our idea of a proper price."

Governmental Controls

AND so it would go as it almost always has. During the days of NRA, a merchant was accused of license if he sold *below* the government-set price. During the days of OPS, he was accused of license if he sold *above* the government-set price. Under "Fair Trade" laws, he is accused of license if he sells either above or below a price which is approved and enforced by government.

Freedom—a condition of non-molestation in the market place and everywhere else—is

often called license! While license—a condition wherein some persons molest other persons—is all too frequently called freedom! The popular concept of freedom has always described a condition in society wherein some persons use legal violence or the threat of legal violence to compel other persons to conform to their wishes. The degree of molestation has varied from time to time and from government to government. But at no time under any government has the popular concept of freedom ever been used to describe either an actual or potential condition of non-molestation among persons.

A Mutual Concept

FREEDOM is destroyed between two persons to whatever extent either one uses violence or the threat of violence to impose his will or viewpoint upon the other. Regardless of who is the aggressor and who is the victim—or whether the violence is legal or illegal—freedom is still infringed.

If you have rendered me helpless by throwing me to the ground and sitting on top of me, everyone understands clearly that my freedom has been severely curtailed. But what is not generally understood is that your freedom is also curtailed as long as you must spend your time and effort to hold me down. You

thereby restrict your own progress and improvement just as you do mine.

Freedom is a *reciprocal* relationship based on *voluntary* agreements and actions. This applies in all human relationships, even though they are seldom as clear and dramatic as person-to-person violence. The only real possibility for complete freedom for yourself as an individual is for you to refrain from initiating violence or the threat of violence against anyone else. This is the vital first step toward a condition of mutual non-molestation—a step that any one of us can take as soon as he is ready.

A Question

BUT,” someone may ask, “since I am holding you down by my own free will, how can it possibly be said that I am thereby interfering with my own freedom? I am doing exactly what I want to do!”

Maybe so. But if the man on top understood the full significance of such a course of action, he would not deliberately follow it nor use the word freedom to describe it.

The reality of this thesis that no person can really have complete freedom for himself while he is imposing his will—legally or illegally—upon the creative activities or incomes of others may possibly be more easily un-

derstood if approached from another angle.*

If all persons in the world except you were suddenly to die, it is most unlikely that you would live out your normal span of life as you would want to do. That is true because the increased material prosperity resulting from specialization and division of labor has encouraged you to depend upon other persons for the things you want and need—the things you *want* to do. Imagine what would happen to you if you had to build your own house from virgin timber with no axe or saw or nails, raise your own food without hoe or plow or seeds, be your own surgeon without instruments or medicines, construct every item of your own electric system without tools of any kind, and so on and so on. You would soon perish.

If half the people in the United States were suddenly to die, you would, for the same reason, no longer be able to do many of the things you have been doing and wish to continue to do. And although it is difficult to trace directly, the same sort of thing happens when even one productive person dies. This fact is easier to visualize if you think in terms

* While the examples given herein deal primarily with material prosperity, this is not to say that economic well-being is the most important aspect of freedom. Actually, it is merely a by-product of something far more important. The examples deal mostly with production because it is generally familiar and because it appears to be the most restricted freedom of all.

of the "key man" of whatever business you are most interested in.

The Result of Controls

NOW LET US transfer this same idea over to the concepts of controls and slavery instead of death. If the records of history are to be given any value at all, they offer conclusive proof that the slave doesn't produce as much as the person who is working of his own free will. Nor can the slave contribute as much to one's spiritual and mental development as he could if he were released from the physical controls over him.

If all mankind were enslaved or controlled by one person or a small group of persons, literally millions of people would starve to death as a result of the tremendous decrease in production that would automatically follow.* The rest would sink slowly back into darkness and savagery. Yet, the people who hold the popular, one-sided concept of freedom will still say that the slave master, at least, would have his "individual" freedom under those circumstances because no one would be controlling *him!*

It is true that the slave master might be able to confiscate a large share of the avail-

* The truth of this fact is proved by both the ancient and modern histories of various European and Asiatic nations.

able production for himself at the expense of others. But, with the exception of a few brilliant fanatics who honestly believe that slavery is the best possible form of society, slaves seldom produce literature or printing presses or new methods for increasing production and distributing it more widely. The man whose activities are directed by violence or the threat of violence doesn't ordinarily invent and increase the production of television sets, better surgical instruments and medicines, great sermons and studies in philosophy, and such. The slave master cannot take for his own use and advancement that which has not been invented or produced! He might honestly believe that he himself has complete freedom, but the decreased rate of development—or even the degeneracy—of his moral, mental, social, and physical well-being would offer conclusive proof of the shortcomings of such a concept of freedom.

All Are Harmed

IF ONLY HALF of all mankind were enslaved, this same thing would happen to the slave master in some proportion. If a person uses violence or the threat of violence—legal or illegal—to control the productive activities or income of even *one person*, he himself will thereby suffer diminishing opportunities for

the development of his own potentialities. And most unfortunate of all, his action against freedom also does great harm to many innocent bystanders who desire to live in peace with their fellow men.

Suppose that someone had tried to control the creative activities of an individual like Edison, or Aquinas, or Beethoven, or Shakespeare, or a hundred other producers in various fields that come readily to mind. The opportunities for peaceful pursuit of the things you now do and wish to continue to do—the real meaning of freedom—would have been decreased immeasurably if the activities and incomes of those individuals had been controlled by some outside authority with the power to direct and restrain them completely. Unfortunately, there *were* some controls upon the creative activities and incomes of those persons. Thus it seems reasonably certain that you and I today are missing many opportunities which would have been available to us if those men had enjoyed complete freedom—if they had lived in a society organized according to the idea of mutual non-molestation.

Future Leaders

THE PRESENT and future productive leaders of mankind are now being severely controlled, directed, and restricted by govern-

mental authority. And it is being done because most of us honestly but mistakenly believe that freedom *demand*s that some men control the creative activities and incomes of other men! The vast majority of the world's people still sincerely believe that they themselves can have complete freedom even though they use violence or the threat of violence to direct the activities and control the incomes of others! They do not accept the idea that freedom is a mutual relationship of non-molestation among persons.

Now someone may say: "This is all very well in theory, but there is no possible way of measuring what might have been or, in this case, even what might be. I still can't see specifically how I lose any of my freedom merely because some person in this or some other country might be controlled by his own government."

Communist Freedom

WELL, let's apply the test to the communist nations of today. Several hundred millions of individual Russians, Chinese, and others are forbidden to trade with you or to visit you or to exchange ideas with you or to worship with you. Our periodicals and newspapers devote much space to the telling of how those persons have lost most of their freedom.

But what has this to do with your freedom? Well, can you visit with those individual Russians and trade with them or exchange ideas with them or worship with them? No, you have lost a great deal of your own freedom even though you may not be aware of it. If any person anywhere in the world is deprived of his freedom to trade or to communicate with you, automatically you thereby lose your freedom of opportunity to trade or to communicate with him. That fact is as undeniable as two plus two equals four.

A Comparison

LEGALIZED VIOLENCE is already being used to deprive almost half of the world's people of their freedom of opportunity to trade or to worship or to communicate or to visit or to exchange ideas with you. To visualize how this affects your own freedom, just imagine what would happen to you if the other half of the world's people were also deprived of their freedom to have any contact with you. Under those conditions, you would soon die from lack of food or shelter or clothing or medical attention, or from sheer boredom or frustration. Yet, the persons who hold the popular idea that freedom can be applied to one person alone would still say that you would remain free because no one would be

molesting you! Such a concept of freedom would appear to be the sheerest nonsense.

It is true that we Americans enjoy more freedom—less legal and illegal molestation—than the people of any other nation. But no person in America is completely free as long as violence—under the power of government or otherwise—is used to restrict or to control or to direct the activities or income of even one peaceful person. To whatever extent any person is forbidden to trade or to exchange ideas with you, to the same extent you are thereby deprived of the opportunity to trade or to exchange ideas with him.

To repeat, freedom is a relationship of mutual non-molestation among persons. Yet, the overwhelming majority of the world's people have always thought of freedom as being the legal right of some persons to impose their wills and viewpoints upon other persons. And they still do. Let us examine a few popular examples of this at home and abroad.

Houses and Subsidies

WHEN THE RUSSIAN government builds houses for some persons at the expense of other persons, it always does it in the good name of freedom. But it cannot logically be called freedom because the process of governmental housing describes a relationship

among persons wherein some persons are undeniably molesting other persons against their wills at some point within the process.

When the English government grants subsidies to certain manufacturers or farmers or other favored groups, it claims to be advancing freedom for the English people. Actually, complete freedom ceases to exist among the persons involved when government rewards some persons at the expense of other persons.

It may be alleged that while a subsidy decreases the freedom of the persons from whom the money is taken, surely it doesn't decrease the freedom of the persons who get it. This is the ever-popular "Robin Hood" concept of freedom—a person can be "free" even though he exists by doing violence to others. The person who accepts that idea of freedom can sincerely advocate complete government ownership and control in the name of freedom. And it is worth noting that the advocate of government ownership—whatever the degree may be—is always quite happy to specify who shall do the taking, whom it shall be taken from, and who shall be rewarded with the confiscated production.

Controls and Democracy

WHEN THE GOVERNMENT of Argentina initiates price controls, wage controls, rent con-

trols, tariffs, government-owned hydroelectric projects, and other similar compulsive devices, it claims to be doing these things to preserve freedom. And apparently the vast majority of Argentineans believe it. Yet, in each instance, some persons obviously are using violence or the threat of violence to impose their wills upon other persons who believe differently. That process should not be described as freedom. And the fact that the molestation is legal has no bearing upon the fact that freedom has thereby been decreased.

When our own government takes our money from us against our wills and gives it to Tito, Franco, Peron—Germany, Italy, Japan, and other nations—our officials sincerely believe that they are doing it to preserve peace and freedom. Yet, this entire process is based on violence or the threat of violence against our own citizens. In most instances, we are compelled to do what few of us would do with our own resources if we were free to decide for ourselves directly. This is the exact reverse of a condition of non-molestation among persons. Such a transaction should never be called freedom.

It is true that our officials were duly elected by the people. But so were our slave-holding officials! Did that fact change slavery into freedom? Directly or indirectly, the American people have the legal right to vote for either a

policy of molestation or a policy of non-molestation. An examination of the record shows quite clearly that the vote is almost always for a program of molestation. The various campaign platforms differ only in the degree of molestation and which group is to be molested and which group is to be in charge of doing the molesting.

Self-Defense

BUT WHAT ABOUT self-defense? Admitting that freedom is decreased between them when one person molests another, what is the innocent victim of the lost freedom to do?

First, the person who fully understands freedom will never knowingly abolish or diminish it. That is, he will never knowingly initiate or advocate any action or law that imposes his ideas or viewpoints upon any other person against that person's will.

Any person who is aware that he is the victim of molestation will always use whatever measures he deems best and most suitable to gain freedom. This is an instinctive reaction; for, obviously, no person wishes to be molested against his will. If he understands freedom, he himself will never knowingly be the aggressor. But whether he understands it or not, he will at least strive for a condition of minimum molestation against himself.

Means to an End

THE MEANS he uses to gain this end may be persuasion, argument, prayer, non-resistance, non-cooperation, guile, counterviolence, politics, or whatever. Most probably it will be a combination of several of these and similar measures, depending on circumstances and his understanding of moral principles.

My goal is freedom—a condition of non-molestation among persons. To the best of my ability, I will strive toward that goal. I will use the means which seem to me to be both morally right and tactically effective.

For example, I would prefer to persuade the would-be murderer to let me live. But if that doesn't work, I believe that I am morally right and tactically correct in using counterviolence to defend myself against him. And that is probably what I will do if the occasion should ever arise.

I believe that I am morally right and tactically correct when I choose to join my fellow men of a like mind in resisting aggression from the gangster at home or the marauding army from abroad—so long as we ourselves don't deny our own principle by using violence or the threat of violence upon our peaceful neighbors who do not choose to join us; so long as we confine our actions to defense against a *direct and unquestionable* threat to

our lives, liberty, or property. I believe that this can be accomplished more effectively by voluntary and coordinated group action than by involuntary group action or isolated individual action. I believe that it is morally right and tactically correct to advocate and support a government dedicated to the proposition of preserving freedom—a society wherein no person is permitted to molest any other person; a society wherein every person is legally forbidden to molest any other person. And, of course, I believe it is morally right and tactically correct for society's political agent to use the necessary degree of legal counterviolence required to stop any person from molesting any other person. It seems to me that the sole purpose of government—the social agency of coercion—should be to defend equally all of its citizens against whoever molests them.

A Doubt

THUS do I advocate and support the use of purely *defensive* violence as an integral and necessary means toward the preservation of maximum freedom in a world where many persons are not yet willing to live in peace with their fellow men. But it should be noted that I have no way of knowing with absolute certainty that my endorsement of even de-

defensive violence is the best principle to follow. I now believe it is. But when I study the lives of Christ, Gandhi, and others who seemed to endorse a policy of turning the other cheek and of not using violence even for defense, I prefer not to become too dogmatic on the subject. Their moral policies appear to have been quite effective.

Whether or not I am justified in my endorsement of defensive violence, this much is certain: I cannot logically claim to favor freedom when I am *initiating* violence or the threat of violence—legal or illegal—to force any person to conform to my ideas, beliefs, or viewpoints. Thus, come what may, I will never knowingly and deliberately initiate violence against my fellow man. I have too much respect for him (and for myself) to do such a thing.

If what my neighbor is doing with himself and his own property appears wrong or illogical to me, then it would seem certain that what I am doing with myself and my property appears equally wrong or illogical to him. Thus we have the choice between neither one's molesting the other, or fighting it out to determine who shall conform to whom. I choose to follow the course of freedom, to take the first and necessary and logical step toward a relationship of mutual non-molestation.

An Epilogue

HERE FOLLOWS what seems to me a most encouraging thought for those among us who despair of liberty.

Freedom will never disappear completely and forever—in Russia or anywhere else. The popular, one-way, “individualistic” concept of freedom will at least serve to prevent that. Since no person wants others to molest *him*, almost every person will rebel against molestation somewhere along the line, even though he may foolishly continue to molest others while he is rebelling against those who are molesting him.

At one time or another, the people of all nations have rebelled against excessive molestation from their own governments. This is as true of the United States as it is of Russia.

These rebellions sometimes bring an increased degree of freedom—that is, a decreased degree of molestation—for a while. Then the rebels, not fully understanding that freedom is a condition of reciprocal non-molestation, seem inevitably to begin to initiate the same sort of laws against which they themselves rebelled.

They rebel against a tea tax, and then put a tax on tea! They rebel against price controls, tariffs, and other restraints on trade;

then they re-establish price controls, tariffs, and the various other restraints on trade! They rebel against the idea of government-granted special privileges to certain persons and groups, and then demand special privileges from government for themselves and their particular groups! They rebel against Siberia for political prisoners, and then send political prisoners to Siberia! They rebel against the Bastille, and then put the guillotine in its place!

Even so, the ideas of human freedom which have been loosed throughout the world during the past 500 years are now too strong to be completely lost again. While the trend of the past 50 years has been toward more government and less freedom, there is no reason to assume this will continue forever.

A Slow Process

IN ORDER for the highest ideas and ideals of mankind to prevail generally, it seems obvious that a condition of peace and freedom is required—a society wherein no person molests any other person; a society wherein no person prevents any other person from developing his creative potentialities to the fullest extent of his understanding and ability.

This desirable state of affairs will not occur all at once. It will grow only as freedom

is understood and as faith in it is restored. If one person decides today to practice freedom, the evolutionary process in human relationships will move forward one more step. That is the only possible path to freedom—a peaceful change in thought and understanding and action among individual persons.

Anyone can begin the practice of freedom whenever he chooses to do so. It is easy, and one need not wait upon other persons to agree before he begins. No committee resolutions or elections or laws are needed for a person to begin the practice of freedom. One need merely resolve not to impose his will—legally or illegally—upon his peaceful fellow men in their religions, their economic theories, their attitudes, their morals, their mores, or whatever. And then start to practice it.

A Groundless Fear

BUT SUPPOSE that “scoundrel next door” takes advantage of your faith in freedom and begins molesting peaceful you? Well, you will discover two things: First, your neighbor is just as convinced that you won’t voluntarily “do the right thing” as you are convinced that he won’t voluntarily “do the right thing.” Second, when your words and your actions have convinced your neighbor that you have no designs upon him or his, he will

admire you so much that he will eventually ask you questions to find out how you got that way—and then he is ready to hear out your ideas on freedom. A clear and simple and consistent explanation from you may cause him also to practice freedom—that is, to stop advocating laws to force other people to do what *he* believes they should do.

Might there not be exceptions? Probably so. But it isn't too important. If a person is busily engaged in minding his own business instead of imposing his ideas and viewpoints upon others, he will be pleasantly surprised at the increase in his own spiritual and physical and material well-being. In addition, if he recognizes a moral obligation to be a good neighbor and citizen, this personal practice of freedom would also seem to be the most effective approach to that desirable goal.

“If, to please the people, we offer what we ourselves disapprove, how can we afterwards defend our work? Let us raise a standard to which the wise and honest can repair. The event is in the hand of God.”

Attributed to George Washington
during the Constitutional Convention

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