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Forgotten Lines

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Henderson, David R. Forgotten Lines. The Freeman: Ideas on Liberty. May 2010.
<http://hdl.handle.net/10945/61531>

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Forgotten Lines

BY DAVID R. HENDERSON



In the January 23, 2010, *Los Angeles Times* crossword puzzle, one of the clues was “Sassy reply to criticism.” The answer: “It’s a free country.” Why do I find this so striking? For two reasons. First, when I grew up in the 1950s and 1960s, not many people around me considered that a sassy reply. When I used the line, it was shorthand for, “I have rights; maybe this isn’t the best decision, but I have the right to make my own mistakes.” Second, almost no one uses that line any more. Why? I think it’s because, if only subconsciously, most people recognize that in some important ways, freedom in the United States has declined.

Pay attention and you’ll see the ways we’re not free. Some of these predate the 1950s. If you have school-aged children, you can’t legally decide not to send them to school. You can’t, for example, have your 17-year-old kids work in your business instead of attending school. At best, you can home-school them, and even that option is limited in some states. Buying liquor is legal only from a licensed dealer, and in many states, licenses are often impossible to get. Forget about using marijuana or cocaine. If you want to get certain medicines, you must first get a doctor’s permission, even if all he does is listen to you ask him to prescribe it.

But many of life’s daily restrictions on freedom are much more recent. If you go to a restaurant, chances are that it’s one in which a state or local government has banned smoking. In my city of Pacific Grove, California, people can’t buy food at a Taco Bell or a Burger King because the city council decided a few years ago not to let those chains in. The government of New York

City banned certain kinds of fats in meals, thus reducing the freedom of producers and consumers who want to produce or consume those fats. If you want to travel by air, the government insists that you get permission from a TSA employee, and to get that permission you must submit to a body search and, maybe soon, an X-ray so that a government employee can see your naked body. And don’t dare make fun of that government employee or you might go to jail.

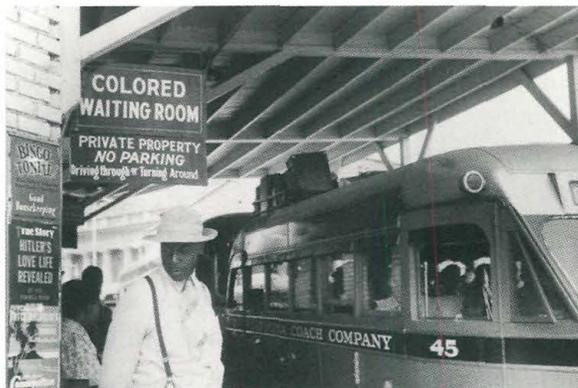
Significant Gains in Freedom

It’s true that over the last 40 years there also have been major increases in freedom, economic and otherwise.

Consider the draft. Americans of my generation, if they were unlucky enough to be male and healthy, knew that when they turned 18, the U.S. government could forcibly put them in the military. During the Vietnam war, in which more than 58,000 Americans were killed, that was a scary prospect. Another major increase in freedom was for black and white people who wished to marry. In many

states anti-miscegenation laws were on the books as late as the 1960s.

On the issue of race another major increase in freedom came in the 1960s, when businesses in the southern United States were no longer forced to discriminate against potential customers who were



Recent decades have seen some significant gains in freedom, despite some losses.

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