

# **How Much Freedom Should We Trade For Our Security?**

Essay & Synopsis

Written by

Jonathan S. Ross

## **SYNOPSIS**

The world as it exists today, and the United States in particular, is faced with a very serious issue when it comes to the question of, "How much freedom should we trade for our security?" Those that promote the idea that for the benefit of society as a whole, individuals should sacrifice much if not all of their right to privacy, thus compromising their freedom, are pursuing a morally bankrupt and dangerously naïve line of reasoning. Trading freedom for security is an elusive chimera, an invitation to the quashing of legitimate dissent and an unconscionable erosion of freedoms that generations of Americans have fought for and even died for in an effort to preserve intact.

Instead of demanding increased governmental oversight into people's private lives, it is imperative that the public hold government accountable for the power that it already wields. Rather than allow the bureaucracy to mindlessly expand and seek ever-growing powers that infringe on individual liberties, it is more critical that the citizenry at large maintain a higher level of vigilance and become more actively involved in their own security. Furthermore, the United States needs to continue to demonstrate, through its deeds and actions and not just political rhetoric, that democratic institutions are inherently stronger and more competitive on the world economic stage, and are the only morally legitimate form of governance. In order to have democracy, there must be room for lawful dissent, and the answer to the threats posed by individuals and organizations that resent our society and culture and democratic ideals is not to implement draconian measures, but to maintain the very values that they hold in contempt.

## ESSAY

The world as it exists today, and the United States in particular, is faced with a very serious issue when it comes to the question of, "How much freedom should we trade for our security?" This is undoubtedly an extremely divisive issue, with some promoting the idea that for the benefit of society as whole, individuals should sacrifice much if not all of their right to privacy, thus compromising their freedom, while others insist that society, and government especially, must be kept in check because of power's tendency to corrupt. Personally, I strongly agree with the latter point of view, and undoubtedly like many essayists responding to this topic and arguing against undue governmental oversight into people's lives, I echo Benjamin Franklin's observation that, "They that can give up essential liberty to obtain a little temporary safety deserve neither liberty nor safety." Trading freedom for security is an elusive chimera, an invitation to the quashing of legitimate dissent and an unconscionable erosion of freedoms that generations of Americans have fought for and even died for in an effort to preserve intact.

Contrary to what some would have the public believe, we live in a world that is inherently insecure. It has been observed that the 19<sup>th</sup> century was the era of colonization and imperialism, the 20<sup>th</sup> century the era of nationalism, and in all likelihood the 21<sup>st</sup> century will witness conflict based on religious ideology, continuing ethnic disputes in regions long subject to such pressures (ironically, often stemming from differences in religious belief), and possible social upheaval in societies in which the gap between rich and poor continues to expand. This sets the stage for significant challenges to the stability of the United States, since its security and stability are not only subject to external threats, but even the specter of internal forces acting against it, either independently or in concert with outside parties.

With the events of September 11, 2001 lingering in the minds of many Americans, there is increasing public clamor for heightened security, yet many people seem unable to articulate just what this should entail. In our modern, consumer-oriented and gadget-obsessed society, there is a fascination with technology, and many believe that this will provide the elusive security that the public demands. Certainly, advances in technology make it possible to monitor the lives of citizens and non-citizens alike, and while this might provide comfort to some, it has the potential to be dangerously abused. For example, in an age in which information is increasingly electronic, it is tempting to envision databases that would house information and provide the authorities with a means to track individuals who are deemed to pose a threat to society. But even if such a program were truly feasible and practical, who would determine what information would be contained in the database? Who would determine what constitutes a threat? And what manner of safeguards would be in place to prevent such information from not being abused or accessed by personnel with no legitimate need to view such information? Furthermore, the accumulation of so much data, especially were it ever to be centralized, poses a very tempting target for those who wish to use technology as a weapon. Data can always be compromised, and in a system in which so many records, from the most mundane to such serious information as finances, health records, etc. are often electronically stored, it's not difficult to imagine the societal havoc that could be wrought should this information be deliberately misappropriated, altered or destroyed.

While the uses of technology in the war on terrorism can yield impressive results, such as the deployment of unmanned surveillance drones that can even carry anti-tank missiles for offensive purposes, or the wide variety of satellite communications, laser-targeting and visual and acoustic sensors that can provide better integration of ground, naval and air assets, it can also become a dangerous crutch. Technology does not replace the need for developing better human intelligence resources, identifying those that wish ill against the United States and ferreting them out. Spy satellites with resolutions that can read newspapers or license plates from space are wonderful to have in the toolbox, but satellites cannot infiltrate terrorist cells.

Essentially, what Americans must come to realize is that freedom equals responsibility. "Eternal vigilance is the price of liberty," observed Wendell Phillips, and this lesson must be taken to heart by all Americans. Instead of relying on governmental agencies to protect them, citizens need to become more self-aware and perhaps a little less self-involved than in the past. We are fortunate, that unlike some nations, we do not live surrounded by countries that at best are perhaps grudgingly tolerant of our right to exist, at worst openly hostile to our interests and sovereignty, and our populace is not accustomed to maintaining the level of vigilance necessary to circumvent even low-level, unsophisticated terrorist actions. Perhaps this is a luxury that can no longer be taken for granted in a post September 11<sup>th</sup> world. Certainly, however, the last thing that we as a nation need to do is create a climate of fear, suspicion and paranoia, and a virtual police state in which large segments of the population are little more than government informants. We as Americans must never lose sight of the corollary to the statement that "freedom equals responsibility," which is that the mark of a free society is one in which individual rights to privacy, as defined through the judicial process and legal precedence, are maintained and respected by government, not eroded due to alarmist views. The founding fathers of the American Revolution understood this, and were wise in believing that a government that fears its populace cannot be said to be governing with the consent of its citizenry.

The United States, by virtue of its position as the sole superpower and a bastion of democratic values and capitalism, as well as its tendency to play the role of global policeman, will always remain a symbolic target for those who oppose what it represents. Our borders are porous, and short of radical action will always remain so, the natural legacy of our free society, non-threatening neighbors and desire for unimpeded trade. The consumerism that drives our society will always alienate those who can only envy the array of goods available to most Americans, especially in societies in which their raw materials and resources are exported to attempt to satisfy the seemingly insatiable needs of those in first-world countries. We must also recognize the fact that our culture tends to displace those of other nations, largely because of the influence of our mass media as well as our success as a nation, and we are often insensitive to the ramifications of this. In some ways, this can be viewed as a positive phenomenon; the democratic ideals that we uphold, our concept of individual civil rights that are innate, unalienable and not bestowed by governmental authority and our generally optimistic belief in the "better angels of our nature" are positive influences on the world stage. However, the other side of the coin is somewhat tarnished; we consume an inordinate amount of the world's resources in relation to the size of our population, we have a tendency to manipulate weaker countries to serve our interests (which goes hand in hand with an irresponsible tendency to abandon them once they no longer are relevant to geopolitical or ideological goals), and we often seem to embrace the arrogant view that we have the answers to world problems, which coupled with our national tendency to simplify complex issues, can be a recipe for disastrous intervention.

So if sacrificing any measure of our current freedom for security is both a foolish and dangerous notion, what can we do? The answer is that the United States can, and must, maintain its self-imposed moral imperative to provide a "bright, shining beacon on the hill" and impart our democratic ideals to nations and cultures that have no tradition of government by consent of the people. The reality of the world is that democracies do not go to war with each other, because by their very nature, there is more value in commerce and peaceful co-existence than existing in a state of hostilities and warfare. The United States has the opportunity, by virtue of its superpower status and the all too often fragile "Pax Americana" imposed by its military and economic hegemony, to inculcate its democratic traditions in cultures that lack these values. This country must continue to demonstrate that free societies enable their citizens to better compete in the global marketplace because individual initiative is encouraged and not restricted; it is no accident that the leading economic powers on the world stage today are democracies, and whatever short-term gains restrictive or totalitarian governments might achieve, in the long run these tend to rot from within because they stifle freedom of thought and expression.

There will always be dispossessed and disenfranchised people whose goals are incompatible with other nations, and these groups and individuals will remain a threat to the stability of the

world at large. Democracies can never be as restrictive as totalitarian societies, and that is one of the prices paid for freedom. Democratic societies must never be compromised by terror, for the loss of such noble ideals embodied in their very existence is anathema to the concept of freedom.

To trade freedom for the thin veneer and illusion of security is a loathsome and morally bankrupt line of reasoning that simply renders a citizen a slave. Relinquishing rights that have been enshrined and rendered sacred by the sacrifices of generations before us is not a legacy that any American alive today should even contemplate. For once these rights are taken, or worse, freely given away, they might be very difficult to ever restore. We must always remain a society in which government "Of the people, by the people and for the people" is the highest aspiration and crowning achievement of our contribution to world history. Generations before us have stood resolutely against the onslaught of forces seeking to curtail or destroy the liberty and freedom that too many Americans as of late have taken for granted. The challenge lies before us, and it is our solemn and unshakable duty to rise to the occasion to safeguard and maintain the freedoms enshrined in our Constitution.