

THE FUTURE OF FREEDOM FOUNDATION

The Legacy of Leonard E. Read

By Jacob G. Hornberger / 1 September 1991

Few people have had a bigger impact on my life than Leonard E. Read, the founder of The Foundation for Economic Education in Irvington, New York. I shall never forget the day I discovered a set of books entitled *Essays on Liberty* which were published by FEE long ago and which included many essays by Read. My life has not been the same since!

Leonard Edward Read was born in Hubbardston, Michigan, on September 26, 1898 — ninety-three years ago this month. He volunteered for service in World War I, and barely survived when the ship on which he was travelling — the *Tuscania* — was torpedoed. After the war, he started his own produce business in Ann Arbor. He then went to work for the United States Chamber of Commerce, ultimately rising to the position of chief executive of the Los Angeles chamber, which was at that time the largest in the country.

Under his management, the L.A. Chamber of Commerce became a driving force in successfully opposing many of the welfare-state, planned-economy schemes which were being promoted in the 1930s. But Read finally realized that it was not sufficient simply to show the fallacies of the interventionist schemes. What was needed, he believed, was an organization which developed and advanced the positive moral and philosophical case for individual liberty and limited government. In 1946, at the age of 47, he founded FEE.

FEE began by publishing pamphlets on different aspects of the freedom philosophy. Among the many authors were two young men from the University of Chicago — Milton Friedman and George Stigler, both of whom would later become Nobel laureates in economics. In the 1950s, FEE took control of a national publication called *The Freeman*, and it became the primary vehicle by which FEE shared its freedom philosophy with others.

From the very beginning, Read attracted to FEE those individuals who shared his principled approach to advancing freedom — people like F.A. Harper, Ludwig von Mises, Henry Hazlitt, Edmund Opitz, Hans and Mary Sennholz, Paul Poirot, Percy and Bettina Greaves, Dean Russell, George Roche, Israel Kirzner, Robert Anderson, Gary North, and many, many more. The energy created by these individuals was ultimately felt all over the world.

Leonard Read took an absolutely uncompromising approach to the principles of freedom. He argued that man's purpose on earth, whatever it is, requires the widest possible ambit for human growth and maturation. Therefore, he believed, a person should be free to do whatever he wants in life as long as it is peaceful.

What role does government have in such a society? If we were all angels, Read said, government would not be necessary. But since there are antisocial people in the world, government's proper role is to protect people from domestic aggression, protect the nation from foreign attack, and, through a judiciary, resolve disputes which arise among the citizenry.

The most powerful aspect of Read's philosophy was with respect to the evil and immorality of the welfare state. The welfare state — socialism — constituted legalized theft because the political process was used to take forcibly one person's money in order to give it to someone else. Read made it uncomfortably clear that any person who supported any aspect of the welfare state supported a violation not only of fundamental principles of morality, but also two of God's Ten Commandments: Thou shall not covet; and Thou shall not steal.

Central to Read's philosophy was an unbending devotion to truth and integrity. A person must always be true to himself, he often said, and to the principles in which he believes. Duplicity, double-dealing, deceit, and lying could never be countenanced — no matter what the circumstances, no matter what the justification. Integrity, in the eyes of Leonard Read, was the first and foremost virtue.

And as a consequence of his strong and abiding devotion to truth and integrity, one always knew where Leonard Read stood on all issues of freedom and limited government. Read had absolutely no respect for those who attempted to hide or disguise their beliefs for fear of losing the favor of others.

Two examples evidence Read's deep dedication to integrity and principle. At a FEE board of trustees meeting, a FEE board member, J. Howard Pew, who was the major stockholder in Sun Oil Company, said, "Leonard, if FEE refuses to change its position favoring free trade, I am going to resign from FEE's board," (and presumably take his donations elsewhere). Read's response to his good friend: "We'll miss you." Pew left the meeting but not the board.

The second example involves a little-known Read essay which is one of the most profound and thought-provoking pieces on war that has ever been written: "Conscience on the Battlefield." Published at the height of the Korean War, the essay resulted in a significant drop in financial support for FEE. For it focused on the moral responsibility of the individual citizen for the wrongful acts of his government — in this case, the moral responsibility of the individual soldier for participating in foreign wars waged by his government.

Three decades later, Read decided to republish "Conscience on the Battlefield." Many supporters told him, "Leonard, if you do this again, it will cost FEE dearly in financial support." Leonard's response: "Publish the essay."

What was often difficult for FEE supporters to accept was Read's methodology. He would constantly be told, "Your approach is too slow! Time is running out! Something must be done now!" but Leonard took the position that no one had been given the mission of saving the world. And recognizing that the world had survived for quite some time, he had no doubts that despite periods of darkness and travail, it would continue to do so.

What then should a person do to advance liberty? As he set forth in one of the finest of his twenty-nine books, *Elements of Libertarian Leadership*, Read argued that the best thing to do was to improve one's self. That is, rather than rushing out to reform the world, a person should instead spend his time reforming and improving himself. As Read's close associate Ed Opitz would say, "Put to good use the 'do it yourself kit' which God has provided you! "

Read's reasoning was that as a freedom devotee became more and more proficient in explaining the principles of freedom, a greater number of people would become attracted to his line of thinking. As he would often observe during his final lecture at FEE seminars, all the darkness in the world cannot put out the light of one wee candle.

People often concluded — wrongfully, in my view — that this meant that Read was advocating an ivory-tower existence in which everyone continued to read and study until people began lining up at their doors to seek wisdom. What Read was actually suggesting, I believe, was that nothing worse can befall a good cause than to have it ineptly defended. And so, rather than try to “set others straight,” one should instead concentrate on setting himself straight. In that way, the activities in which freedom devotees become involved — letters to the editor, political activity, speeches, articles, and so forth — will stand a better chance of attracting others to our philosophy.

Leonard Read never permitted himself to fall victim to the malady which afflicts so many freedom devotees — depression and despair over freedom's prospects. Unabashed optimism and hope permeated every word which Read wrote. Fighting for freedom was so enjoyable — so much fun — for this man that one cannot help but wonder whether he would have fallen into at least a temporary despondency had freedom been achieved in his lifetime!

Read's long-term aim was to see “wellsprings of knowledge” develop all over the world who would advance liberty. He knew that cooperation, as well as competition, between freedom devotees would inevitably improve freedom's prospects. And so he provided the model for the rest of us to follow: rather than tear down other freedom devotees through disparagement, gossip, false accusations, personal attacks, and the like, we should instead do our very best to promote and assist each other, knowing that in this way, the chances for achieving freedom will be improved.

In FEE's early days, the prospects for freedom were dim indeed. Much of the world had fallen under the iron fist of communism. And the rest of the world was mired in socialism disguised as “free enterprise.” In a sense, Read and his associates became freedom's “Johnny Appleseeds. They planted seeds of liberty when they were so desperately needed.

And have those plantings blossomed! Today, there are thousands of freedom devotees, including many free-market, educational organizations, all over the world. And most, if not all, can be traced to the seeds planted by Leonard Read and FEE.

Leonard Read died on May 14, 1983, at the age of 84. Through his vision and his dedication to the principles of freedom, the intellectual environment is now significantly different than it was in FEE's early days. While it remains important to continue planting seeds of liberty for future generations, it is also incumbent on us freedom devotees living today to pick the ripening fruit off the vine. What greater tribute could we pay to Read and his associates than to achieve freedom in our lifetime?