

THE BEST ALTERNATIVE

by Roger M. Clites

Those of us who advocate the free market are regularly frustrated in attempts to discuss economic issues with people afflicted with the anti-capitalistic mentality. In many such situations about all we can do is try to part on amicable terms. After all, it's all but impossible to reason away prejudice.

However, occasionally I do encounter a mind that is not completely closed. In that case I usually can get my ideas heard and considered if I establish an identity of interests. That is, I try to show my challenger that we are seeking the same goal, and differ only as to the means of attaining it.

In the case of the person who challenges, "I'll bet you are one of those people who think that we should not have the Federal Reserve System" a helpful response might be, "My desire is to have such things as a currency that retains its value so that savings, life insurance policies, and other investments do not lose their value over time." If the challenger pauses before replying, I might add: "And I'd like to see an economy without frequent severe downturns." Sometimes this will lead him to respond with an open mind. It won't always do so but most times it will achieve a much more favorable response than does a simple statement to the effect that yes, we should do away with the Federal Reserve System.

The same type of response can be used in many other economic discussions. I once received a telephone call from a woman who

described the working conditions of Mexicans who were employed in plants just south of the Rio Grande. I told her that I assumed she was concerned about the welfare of those Mexicans from the way she described the situation in which they lived and worked. She assured me that she was. I replied that the Mexicans must see their current arrangement as their best alternative. This seemed to baffle the woman so she digressed onto other semi-related matters.

After two or three minutes, she began talking about Mexicans "taking jobs from Americans." I reminded her that initially she had expressed her concern about the living standards of the Mexicans. But now it seemed that she was willing to sacrifice the best alternative of those people whom she considered to be exploited for the interests of some better-off Americans. She replied that this "wasn't fair." When I asked how this was unfair she said that I kept talking about alternatives and the Mexicans were taking away the Americans' best alternatives. I suggested that perhaps trying to compete with the low-paid Mexican workers was not the better alternative for Americans. I was somewhat surprised, but pleased, when she replied that she would "have to think about that" before she hung up.

Friendly Persuasion

Sometimes it may not be possible to open the mind of a challenger but if a discussion is taking place where others are present it

Roger Clites teaches at Tusculum College in Tennessee.

may be possible to persuade some of those others of the validity of one's point.

I once attended a meeting in which a young man was insisting that people should not have to do a certain dirty, dangerous job. Of course he overlooked the fact that the lives of other people could not attain their present levels of comfort if that job were not done. In fact, the job happened to be essential to our overall way of life.

I asked him why people accepted that kind of work. He responded that it was all they could get. I suggested that perhaps it could be described as "the best they can get." He literally shouted, "What's the difference?" I pointed out that he was proposing to take from those people their best choice. Unable to cope with this reasoning he began to babble about "people in three-piece suits." At this point I commented to those nearby that I guessed that the man recognized the correctness of my point since he felt compelled to "shoot the messenger." Another man spoke up and said that previously he would have probably agreed with the young man but that now he saw that to prohibit the work in question would hurt those who did it as well as the consumers who would be denied the service being supplied. Several other people nodded their heads in agreement and the young man bolted from the room muttering a curse!

Before we judge that fellow too harshly we should explore what led him to his way of thinking. In many cases people who disdain a certain type of work project their own judgment about it onto those who engage in it. A few years ago a sociologist entered into a study of men who collected residential trash. One of his basic assumptions was that they hated their work. He

soon learned, much to his amazement, that they found it quite interesting. For example, one trash collector told the sociologist that he knew many things about the people whose trash he collected. To illustrate this he pointed out that the people who lived in one corner house held a "big booze party" every Saturday night, as indicated by the quantity of liquor bottles in their trash immediately thereafter. He knew similar, though less colorful, things about everyone on his route.

Different Standards

Failure to realize that other people may have different standards and value judgments than they have often leads some people to become needlessly concerned about the condition of other people. This is often due to lack of experience in their own lives. Perhaps I am fortunate that I have worked in a steel mill, on house construction, and in wheat fields in order to finance my academic training. Someone who has had his or her education financed solely by parents, scholarships, and other such sources may have had the best alternative for preparing for his or her own life taken away by people with perfectly good intentions.

I once heard a psychology professor say, "People do what they want to do." It may be the lesser of two or more evils but they choose to do what they prefer, given their alternatives. If it can be gotten across to well-meaning people that they are harming, not helping, those who are less fortunate a few of those well-intended people may begin to understand the superiority of voluntary action over coercion.



A LEVEL PLAYING FIELD

by Robert Zimmerman

I am far from a wealthy individual. Despite the wonderful stories you hear about filmmakers drinking piña colodas by the swimming pool and having their grapes peeled for them, the movies do not necessarily make you rich. If I had to define my financial class, where I stand in the great rankings of monetary success, I would personally place myself as lower middle class.

In other words, I get by, pay my bills, do the creative work I like, and try to live a decent life.

Being self-employed (a difficult thing to do in our modern corporate world), I have had to pay for my own health insurance. When I realized I needed to do this, I got out the yellow pages, made a few phone calls, and found an insurance company that had a policy I liked and was reasonably priced. Because this is a form of insurance, I did this at the very beginning of my self-employment. I realized that no company would give me a policy if I waited until I was sick. Many people in our society do not do this, and when they do become ill, they cannot get an insurance company to accept them. As tragic as this is, it is the consequence of their own decision to save the cost of insurance when they were healthy.

I did not want to be placed in this situation. The whole idea behind insurance is to obtain it in advance of disaster. I made the calls, I found a policy, and I paid the bills. I recognized that in a truly free society,

there are consequences for my actions, and I needed to act to avoid the worst consequence.

The state legislators of New York, also aware of the tragic consequences of not buying health insurance in advance of illness, decided in July 1992 simply to outlaw these consequences. As my own State Assemblyman said, "We needed to level the playing field, so that the millions of middle class people who didn't have health insurance could get it."

The subsequent law requires all insurance companies to charge everyone the same rate, regardless of age, health, sex, or occupation. It also forbids all health insurance companies from refusing anyone a policy. In other words, not only are we all created equal, we are all created identical, and the insurance companies are required to make believe that there are no differences between us.

Now, according to supporters of the bill, health insurance will be available for everyone at the same cost. According to the State Insurance Superintendent Salvatore Curiale, "people might have to pay a little more, but it won't be a significant amount more."

Within six months of its passage, 10 of the 18 major health insurance companies in New York decided to leave the state. Some decided to refuse to take any additional customers, while others canceled all policies. Of the remaining companies, all have said that they will have to increase their fees, doubling or tripling them.

My own insurance company decided to

Mr. Zimmerman is a feature film producer in New York City.