



Remarks by John D. Colyandro

Friedman Legacy for Freedom Lunch & Policy Primer

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Good afternoon.

We are here to celebrate Milton Friedman. In doing so, I cannot help being a bit mournful—not for the man himself, for he lived a full, active, and consequential life—but for us, because in the decades since the publication of “Free to Choose” we have slid even more precipitously toward the coercive state.

That slippage isn’t so clear. After all, not one of the first ten amendments to the Constitution of the United States has been repealed. There’s been no military coup; no re-imposition of wage and price controls; no take over of the airlines.

The coercive state that envelops us is, in some respects, more insidious than that in many broken regimes. We remain largely free to choose a job, own property, worship God, and seek redress of grievances. The slippage comes from the ever-increasing appetite of politicians to transfer wealth in ways that are pleasing to the population—that buy favor, win accolades, and generate enthusiasm in the media for grand political schemes.

We have become content—even self-satisfied—with a new social contract that leaves us begging for more. The general public no longer finds offense in transfer payments because all of us benefit from them. The soft tentacles of government embrace each of us—every socio-economic group—to the detriment of our human and economic freedom. It is a contract that is deceptively coercive, like grandma tempting us with a bit of candy in return for a kiss on the cheek.

But since we gather in memory of the life and work of Milton Friedman let me digress for a moment to more affirming thoughts.

We owe a debt of gratitude to Milton Friedman because he helped popularize economics. Economics is well-deserving of its nickname, the dismal science, because professional, academic economists make it so.

Though I remain skeptical, I suppose there is a need for all the charts and graphs and calculus and statistics that make economics unapproachable. Perhaps

academics want it that way. The more indecipherable professional jargon is the more self-important the professional becomes.

But I never got the sense that Milton Friedman, despite all the awards and honors and praise, was a self-important man. Indeed, he seemed to understand that if his particular message of economic freedom were ever to resonate among the general public that he would have to be the people's economist.

Friedman's regular column for *Newsweek* magazine put economics—free market economics—within reach of the casual reader because Friedman grasped that economics is much more than charts and graphs and calculus. Economics is the sum total of the daily, never-ending decision-making of hundreds of millions of people predicated on our values, perceptions, wants, needs, and desires. Viewed that way, economics is more robust and interesting and relevant because life cannot be captured by a mathematical formula. With that understanding, we have a clear view of why Friedman so passionately opposed the coercive state.

It is impossible for central planners to make an economy work because there is no way for them to anticipate, much less meet, the wants and needs of hundreds of millions of people. It is why the Soviet Union failed, it is why Communist China is morphing, and it is why the rest of the world simultaneously envies and despises the United States of America.

To most of us, Friedman is best known and revered for the book "Free to Choose," co-authored with his wife Rose.

"Free to Choose" wasn't ground-breaking but is remarkable because of its simplicity and clarity. It gave powerful voice to a growing number of Americans concerned about the direction of America. Our nation had slipped into rickety disrepair after so many decades of New Deals, New Frontiers and Wars on Poverty—none of which met expectations, except to those who believe the rather visible hand of government should slap us into submission or caress us into gentle repose.

"Free to Choose" helped ignite the Reagan revolution, and it is fair to say every one here was influenced directly or indirectly by Friedman.

The important questions that Friedman raised are these: what is it that we are supposedly free to choose, and what is the basis of our freedom to choose?

For Friedman, the basis of our freedom is equality and liberty: "In the early days of the Republic," he wrote, "equality meant equality before God; liberty meant the

liberty to shape one's own life. Equality and liberty were two faces of the same basic value—that every individual should be regarded as an end in himself.”¹

As defined by Friedman, this is the object of our freedom:

“A free society releases the energies and abilities of people to *choose* their own objectives. Freedom preserves the opportunity for today's disadvantaged to become tomorrow's privileged and, in the process, enables almost everyone, from top to bottom, to enjoy a fuller and richer life.”²

In celebrating the genius of the American experiment, Friedman noted that “the two ideas of human freedom and economic freedom working together came to their greatest fruition in the United States. Those ideas are still very much with us. They are part of the very fabric of our being.”³

“But,” Friedman warned in 1979, “we have been straying from them. We have been forgetting the basic truth that the greatest threat to human freedom is the concentration of power.”⁴

The most pertinent and alarming aspect of “Free to Choose” is Appendix A, which is a reprint of the Socialist Platform of 1928.

Over the course of decades in Texas, nearly every feature of the Socialist Platform has either been adopted by the Legislature or imposed by the federal government.

Vast tracts of land are owned and managed by the government, including the mineral rights to those lands. Property rights are secondary to the insatiable appetite of government. Property taxes are a fiscal leukemia to homeowners.

Municipal-owned utilities, and even larger government entities like the LCRA, provide power.

Communications and power are governed, and rates set, with state oversight by the Public Utilities Commission; transportation remains dominated by the government.

State water policy is nothing short of a massive public works project.

¹ “Free to Choose.”

² “Free to Choose.” Page 139.

³ “Free to Choose.” Page 297

⁴ *Ibid*

By choice, the state is in the process of adopting a cradle-to-grave approach to insurance.

In recent years, we have witnessed—or been party to—the creation of a new corporate tax, a subsidy program for business, and a massive court-ordered transfer of wealth in the name of public education. The most powerful interest at the state capitol is not a taxpayer organization, but the Texas Municipal League and the assortment of teachers’ unions who have a stake in the centralization and maintenance of governmental power.

This is not to say that all is wrong with the world. It is not. Much good gets done, and many of our legislators and elected leaders deserve our respect and support. But we are falling far short of Friedman’s vision in Texas.

In assessing where we are and where we are going, it is difficult to reconcile *our* belief in freedom with the notion that other people willingly choose to give up theirs—to imbue the state with more power, even if it is the soft power of cushiony giveaways that buy our loyalty.

In one memorable *Newsweek* column from 1982, Friedman wrote: “There is a sure-fire way to predict the consequences of a government social program adopted to achieve worthy ends. Find out what the well-meaning, public-interested persons who advocated its adoption expected it to accomplish. Then reverse those expectations. You will have an accurate prediction of actual results.”

Despite all experience to the contrary, politicians keep trying ever new wondrous and exotic schemes to eliminate all manner of social malady, including poverty, accident and illness. Yes, the state of Texas will even find a cure for cancer.

“Fortunately,” Friedman concludes, “we are, as a people, still free to choose which way we should go—whether to continue along the road we have been following to ever bigger government, or to call a halt and change direction.”⁵

Will we change direction? I am not so sure. It is sinful to lose hope, but a bit of skepticism is healthy and realistic in the current environment. After all, the federal government and state government are far bigger than when “Free to Choose” was published.

Government spends more today on human services—a.k.a. welfare—than at any time in our history despite the fact there is no social or economic crisis plaguing America. Politicians have turned the world upside down because their priorities

⁵ “Free to Choose.” Page 297

are inverted. Simply put: government spending should not skyrocket as the population becomes better off.

In my view, we will only change direction, as Friedman implores, when we rediscover the eternal and essential nature of freedom, and renew our passion in the cause for which Friedman so generously devoted his life.

Friedman summed it this way: “Our society is what we make it. We can shape our institutions. Physical and human characteristics limit alternatives available to us. But none prevents us from building a society that relies primarily on voluntary cooperation to organize both economic and other activity, a society that preserves and expands human freedom, that keeps government in its place, keeping it our servant and not letting it become our master.”⁶

Thank you for attending this luncheon event.

Many thanks to our friends at the Texas Public Policy Foundation for hosting us today, and very special thanks to our guest Dr. Siems.

Finally, God bless Milton Friedman.

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⁶ “Free to Choose.” Page 29