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Bank Notes is a quarterly newsletter published by Infinite Banking Concepts
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HERE WE ARE again at the IRS's favorite time of the year -- we get to fill out all that "Mickey Mouse" paperwork and abide by a tax code that, I'm convinced, no one really understands. Give all your tax information to 10 IRS experts and ask them to calculate your tax liability and you will get 11 different answers!

Look to the left side of this page and click on the April 2001 issue of **BANK NOTES.** Scroll down and find my article, **Lies! Lies! Lies!** It is a reminder of what is really going on in our economy.

I've added a couple of books to my reading list recommendations. ***The Transfer Society*** by David N. Laband and George C. McClintock demonstrates the absurdity of government programs -- one faction is spending a ton of money trying to get the government to give them a special deal and another faction is spending a ton of money trying to prevent them from doing so. What if all that energy was expended on doing something worth while? As Leonard E. Read said, "It is impossible for you to be productive while holding someone else down."

For insight on how all this nonsense got started read Tom DiLorenzo's new book, **The Real Lincoln.** I'm warning you, this one will turn your world upside down - but that doesn't negate the truth that Tom reveals. This is essential reading. You can get both the above books from **www.amazon.com**.

For support of my position on "compliance," study Karen De Coster's article below.

Resist the State

By Karen De Coster

Consumer protection regulation is the consumer's worst nightmare. In fact, it is not protective at all. It is merely another one of those regulatory rackets that have the appearance of providing necessary security for a collective group in an entirely positive sense while encompassing no negatives. After all, how can anything entitled "protection" have a downside?

In spite of its name, consumer protection regulation consists of one primary negative – the growth of the State. All other negatives fall out from this, and any positive elements are lost in the bureaucrat-controlled statism that rules the consumer's existence.

The politics of consumer protection purport to have the interests of an uninformed consumer as the basis for its existence. This shakedown flourishes under the guise of proper dissemination of information to the buying consumer, and securing safety from dangerous products and services. However, these regulators use the very tool they purport to fight: the use of *misinformation.*

The proponents of consumer protection regulation falsely assume no individual knowledge is at hand, nor can it be readily obtained. The premise is that some collective group of so-called experts (read, bureaucrats) is necessary to gather information, empirically analyze it, and distribute the results to an accepting populace eager to follow their edict.

The truth is, when purchasing any product/service, the consumer is the one most capable of making the decisions affecting his needs, and selecting the products that best suit those needs. No amount of regulation from federal, state, or local bureaucracies can guide him at the intimate level of knowledge he has at his own disposal.

The consumer thought process, essentially, tends toward building a hierarchy in which information is to be processed, analyzed, and acted upon. The more value that is placed on the information to be amassed, the more willing the consumer is to expend the costs of obtaining that information. As Austrian economist F.A. Hayek argues, "the knowledge of the circumstances of which we must make use never exists in concentrated or integrated form, but solely as the dispersed bits of incomplete and frequently contradictory knowledge which all the separate individuals possess."

However, the regulatory bodies that make and enforce rules in the marketplace infringe on the rights of the individual to ascertain those products that best suit his needs. These regulatory bodies take over the information gathering processes, and their regulations make it impossible for the consumer to have the primacy of decision-making as to what goods/services to sell, buy, or trade, because quite often, regulations do not allow for the unhindered production, distribution, or availability of desired goods.

The Federal Trade Commission is the chief controller of all things bureaucratic in the land of consumer goods. Its mission statement says it "seeks to ensure that the nation's markets function competitively, and are vigorous, efficient, and free of undue restrictions". In addition, the FTC claims "the Commission's efforts are directed toward stopping actions that threaten consumers' opportunities to exercise informed choice." Of course, these are only small snapshots that make up the bigger picture of the tyranny the FTC has lorded over businesses and individuals, from buying and selling to antitrust follies.

Looking at the FTC's Consumer Protection website, one can find an abundance of "consumer education" bullroar like, *Holiday Shopping: Is a Sale Price Your Best Deal?*; *More Than Once Upon a Mattress: Used Bedding Labeling Rules*; *How to Buy Genuine American Indian Arts and Crafts*; *Buying a Washing Machine? It's a Load-ed Question*, and, well, you get the picture. Apparently, we’re all a bunch of imbeciles who bequeath to Big Government our ability to obtain and manage product information.

Furthermore, there is the Fed's ludicrous *National Consumer Protection Week*, which, in February of this year, focused on "predatory lending" information that, apparently, no consumer could afford to miss. Moreover, there's the *Consumer Bill of Rights and Responsibilities* pertaining to health care, which was commissioned by Clinton & Company; the *Cable Consumer Bill of Rights*, making sure that the consumer has access to another "right" (cable TV); and Ralph Nader's call for a *Credit Card Bill of Rights.* And, as if the federal consumer shakedown isn't corrupt enough, it's backed up by the state consumer protection agencies. Virtually every state can lay claim to its own contribution to the bureaucratic inanity. And it goes on and on.

The advocates that parade in favor of these so-called consumer protection laws have only one objective in mind; that is, to control the production and distribution of products and services in such a way that they can attain their vision of a socialistic, authoritarian society based on centralized production and equal distribution.

In order to do that, the egalitarians have to break down individual sovereignty, and they start by taking normal day-to-day decision-making out of the hands of individuals, and putting it into the hands of the State. Eventually, the masses become numb to the idea of all the regulatory madness, and in fact, come to expect it and demand it.

The regulatory State, having sustained its centralized grip on the masses, proceeds to prescribe the Dos and Don'ts of everyday life. From beautifying our lawns to killing our spiders, from buying our food to buying our prescriptions, and from solving impotence to our consumption of petroleum, a government bureaucracy is there solely to dictate whether these products should be sanctioned and how and when they are to be manufactured. Eventually, the regulatory State becomes a mindset where subjugation is such that people think they're no longer capable of buying a McDonald's coffee without being warned that it's hot, or buying a pillow without 3 tags hanging off the thing, warning them of the lethal dangers of said product.

All said, our individual liberty is driven by economic freedom. And central to that freedom is the ownership of one's earned wages and profits, and having the capability to spend those profits in a free market as an unhindered, decision-making consumer. In its essence, this micro-management of the consumer sector strangles productivity and makes knowledge-seeking a more costly chore.

A resistance to the State and its various forms of regulatory strangulation is necessary for liberty, and essential for emancipating the consumer.

February 19, 2002

Karen De Coster, CPA, is a paleolibertarian freelance writer.

Regulation and Reality

by William L. Anderson

[Posted February 15, 2002]

With Enron, Global Crossing, and other debacles in the news, the usual hue and cry for "more regulation" is hitting full steam. In a recent *New York Times* column, Paul Krugman--always an apostle for expansion of the police powers of the state--says that the Enron collapse will have an even larger impact on the future of this country than the terrorist attacks of September 11, as he believes that the regulatory powers of government will now become much greater, a development that he welcomes.

Prophecies, of course, are cheap and usually wrong, but it is instructive for us to examine not only what went wrong at Enron, but to ask whether or not expansion of government regulation of business is the "appropriate" remedy. As many of us have spoken out against the knee-jerk decision by Congress and President George W. Bush to make airport security officers federal employees, so we need to resist this attempt to expand the regulatory state.

At the same, we in the libertarian-classical liberal camps need to articulate why the "solution" of regulation is not a solution at all. Furthermore, we also need to point out that behind the rhetoric is a set of statist agendas which, if enacted into law, will make our lives more difficult in many ways. Let me begin.

The spectacular crash of Enron, just like the crash of numerous savings and loans more than a decade ago, makes for good theater, but it often produces more heat than light. The typical thing we hear is this: "Business needs more government regulation. We pulled back regulation because of ideological zealotry, and this is what happened."

This might sound good in newspaper editorial offices and in college classrooms, but it is far from realistic. While ideology may play a role in the establishment or undoing of regulation, it generally takes a backseat to personal, business, and political agendas that truly drive the political system. Of course, part of the entire charade that surrounds the implementation and enforcement of regulation is putting forth the notion that government regulation is a necessary entity that prevents corruption, business losses, and harm to consumers.

The myth is fashioned in the following way. First, it is said that without regulation, markets will be chaotic and disorderly. Thus, regulation works in much the same manner as a stoplight at a busy intersection. Without this regulatory apparatus, drivers would be crashing into one another, and without the hand of the state to guide business operations, markets would crash and burn as well.

Second, regulation is a last-resort solution that is applied only when businesses abuse the freedom that the government has so graciously given them. According to this supposed scenario, free markets result in chaos, corruption, and abuse of customers that ultimately becomes so bad that government *must step in* and clean up the mess. Afterward, businesses are forced to behave in an orderly fashion, and people once again are able to gain confidence in government and the economy, as trustworthy, disinterested people who do not stand to game the system take control of the regulatory apparatus.

The problem with these explanations, of course, is that they are not true. Let us take the "traffic signal" analogy first. This explanation operates on the assumption that everyone who operates within a market system is essentially "flying blind," in the same way that those who support this "theory" assume that all drivers approach nonlighted intersections at full speed and wearing blinders.

Common sense tells us that this "theory" is bogus. It is in the interest of market participants to gain as much information as they can when they engage in exchange and production. Furthermore, the various signals sent by markets serve as regulating mechanisms. For example, the Enron collapse did not come because regulators blew the whistle on the company's fraudulent operations, but rather because potential investors came to realize the company's shell games could no longer be hidden. The judgment of investors operating in the free market was swift and sudden: America's corporate darling was relegated to the abyss of penny stocks.

Businesses engage in numerous activities that include not only self-regulation but also various types of classifications as signals of quality. For example, many certification organizations are privately run and require those who wish to join that profession to pass rigorous exams. (The test for individuals to become certified public accountants, for example, is notorious for its difficulty.)

State-run licensing, on the other hand, while touted as a "signaling" mechanism, has been demonstrated time and again to be nothing more than a scheme to keep new entrants out of the market. The regulation literature in economics is so complete and overwhelming in pointing out the real reason for much regulation that only those who are ideologically blinded will not recognize what is going on. (The chapter on regulation, "Who Protects the Consumer?" in Milton and Rose Friedman's *Free to Choose* is quite informative on this subject, but it is hardly the last word, as Austrians and non-Austrians alike have continually demonstrated the follies of regulation.)

Furthermore, the government regulatory process itself is often so confusing and disorganized that regulators are more out of touch than the people they supposedly regulate. Bruce Yandle, in his book *The Political Limits of Environmental Regulation: Tracking the Unicorn,* points out that the process simply breaks down under its own weight:

> Federal air quality regulation was beginning to look more like a Unicorn. There were elaborate descriptions of details and behavior, but no one could really admit to having seen the real process in full operation. . . . Instead, those interested in environmental quality constantly pushed for more rules, as if rules alone were the goal, not improvements in the environment. (pp. 86-87)

Yandle was able to see the system at work from the inside from his position as an economist who served in a number of regulatory capacities in Washington. There was the perceived notion of how regulation was supposed to work, but in the end, reality always prevailed. This has not kept advocates of government regulation from continuing to proclaim the same tired message over and over again.

Advocates of regulation like to give the impression that business markets are a rendition of a Wild West show in which the participants are running amok until government shows them the way. For example, they say that, without regulation, fraud will be rampant.

Please understand that fraud is a crime under common law and was prosecuted as such long before the U.S. and state governments began to set up regulatory agencies in the late 1800s. Furthermore, the business deceptions that characterized much of Enron's behavior occurred in heavily regulated securities markets. (Krugman has been preaching from his *New York Times* perch that Enron was operating in an unregulated environment, something so far from the truth that only a *Times* editor or an Ivy League English professor could believe it.)

Government regulation did not keep Enron from defrauding its stockholders and employees. While its slide into bankruptcy has been spectacular, it could not have engaged in its financial shenanigans without the help of the Federal Reserve's 1990s policy of shoveling new credit willy-nilly into the economy. In fact, the very presence of heavy government regulation and intervention by the Fed into financial markets tends to create a false sense of assurance that "if the government is regulating it, everything must be okay."

There is also the quaint notion that government regulators are picked from a pool of scholarly, disinterested observers who (1) know how the regulated industry really works, (2) have no ties, financial or otherwise, to the industries being regulated, and (3) have the ability to provide the kind of leadership the regulated industries really need.

In truth, the "revolving door" between business and industry is the reality. As I noted in these pages several months ago, Joel Klein, who headed the U.S. Department of Justice's anti-Microsoft antitrust efforts, left his position to work in private industry as an antitrust lawyer. To put it another way, he was able to command hundreds of millions of dollars of tax dollars, in essence, to help prepare the way for him to go into private business and make millions of dollars per year.

Nor are the Joel Kleins the exception. As Friedman pointed out in *Free to Choose*, after the Interstate Commerce Commission was created in 1887 to regulate the railroads, railroad executives soon found that the ICC could be turned to their advantage. He writes:

> As the campaign against the railroads mounted, some farsighted railroad men recognized that they could turn it to their advantage, that they could use the federal government to enforce their price-fixing and market-sharing agreements to protect themselves from state and local governments.

It was not long before the august body of railroad regulators was dominated by the railroads themselves--and this was the rule, not the exception, for industry regulation. Economists from George Stigler to Murray Rothbard have pointed out that the pattern of regulation is for existing firms to use it as a government-enforced device to create and maintain cartels. History demonstrates that regulation does not protect consumers; it protects producers.

Krugman and others who claim that the Enron scandal will be a watershed for regulation miss the point. Government regulation already dominates our economic landscape. Tossing on a few more rules might do damage, but it will not prevent fraud from occurring in the future. For that matter, all of this new regulation that Krugman and others demand will not even prevent another Enron. In truth, it might ensure that we have more Enrons down the road.

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This article was sent to me from the Internet, so there is always the element of doubt as to its authenticity -- but it surely does make for fun reading! Enjoy.

Below is an actual letter sent to a Bank in the United States. The Bank Manager thought it amusing enough to have it published in the New York Times.

Dear Sir:

I am writing to thank you for bouncing my check with which I endeavored to pay my plumber last month. By my calculations some three nanoseconds must have elapsed between his presenting the check and the arrival in my account of the funds needed to honor it. I refer, of course, to the automatic monthly deposit of my entire salary, and arrangement which, I admit, has only been in place for eight years.

You are to be commended for seizing that brief window of opportunity, and also for debiting my account by $50 by way of penalty for the inconvenience I caused to your bank. My thankfulness springs from the manner in which this incident has caused me to rethink my errant financial ways. You have set me on the path of fiscal righteousness. No more will our relationship be blighted by these unpleasant incidents, for I am restructuring my affairs in 2002, taking as my model the procedures, attitudes and conduct of your very bank. I can think of no greater compliment and I know you will be excited and proud to hear it.

To this end, please be advised about the following changes:

I have noticed that whereas I personally attend to your telephone calls and letters, when I try to contact you, I am confronted by the impersonal, ever-changing, pre-recorded, faceless entity which your bank has become.

From now on I, like you, choose only to deal with a flesh-and-blood person.

My mortgage and loan repayments will, therefore and hereafter, no longer be automatic, but will arrive at your bank, by check, addressed personally and confidentially to an employee at your branch whom you must nominate. You will be aware that it is an offense under the Postal Act for any other person to open such an envelope.

Please find attached an Application Contact Status which I require your chosen employee to complete. I am sorry it runs to eight pages, but in order that I know as much about him or her as your bank knows about me, there is no alternative. Please note that all copies of his or her medical history must be countersigned by a Notary Public, and the mandatory details of his/her financial situation (income, debts, assets and liabilities) must be accompanied by documented proof.

In due course I will issue your employee with a PIN number which he/she must quote in dealings with me. I regret that it cannot be shorter than 28 digits but, again, I have modeled it on the number of button presses required to access my account balance on your phone bank service.

As they say, imitation is the sincerest form of flattery. Let me level the playing field even further by introducing you to my new telephone system, which you will notice, is very much like yours.

My Authorized Contact at your bank, the only person with whom I will have any dealings, may call me at any time and will be answered by an automated voice service:

Press buttons as follows:

1. To make an appointment to see me.

2. To query a missing payment.

3. To transfer the call to my living room in case I am there.

4. To transfer the call to my bedroom in case I am sleeping.

5. To transfer the call to my toilet in case I am attending to nature.

6. To transfer the call to my mobile phone if I am not at home.

7. To leave a message on my computer, a password to access my computer is required. Password will be communicated at a later date to the Authorized Contact.

8. To return to the main menu and to listen to options 1 through 7

9. To make a general complaint or inquiry. The contact will then be put on hold, pending the attention of my automated answering service.

While this may on occasion involve a lengthy wait, uplifting music will play for the duration of the call. This month I've chosen a refrain from "The Best of Woodie Guthrie: "Oh, the banks are made of marble, With a guard at every door, And the vaults are filled with silver, That the miners sweated for."

On a more serious note, we come to the matter of cost. As your bank has often pointed out, the ongoing drive for greater efficiency comes at a cost which you have always been quick to pass on to me. Let me repay your kindness by passing some costs back.

First, there is a matter of advertising material you send me. This I will read for a fee of $20 per page.

Inquiries from the Authorized Contact will be billed at $5 per minute of my time spent in response.

Any debits to my account, as, for example, in the matter of the penalty for the dishonored check, will be passed back to you.

My new phone service runs at 75 cents a minute. You will be well advised to keep your inquiries brief and to the point.

Regrettably, but again following your example, I must also levy an establishment fee to cover the setting up of this new arrangement.

May I wish you a happy, if ever-so-slightly less prosperous, New Year?

Your Humble Client,

Do You Own Yourself?

by Butler Shaffer

One of my favorite quotations comes from Thomas Pynchon: "if they can get you asking the wrong questions, they don't have to worry about answers." Our world is in the mess it is in today because most of us have internalized the fine art of asking the wrong questions. Contrary to the thinking that would have us believe that the conflict, violence, tyranny, and destructiveness that permeates modern society is the result of "bad" or "hateful" people, disparities in wealth, or lack of education, *all* of our social problems are the direct consequence of a general *failure to respect the inviolability of one another's property interests!*

I begin my Property classes with the question: "do you own yourself?" Most of my students eagerly nod their heads in the affirmative, until I warn them that, by the time we finish examining this question at the end of the year, they will find their answer most troubling, whatever it may be today. "If you *do* own yourself, then why do you allow the state to control your life and other property interests? And if you answer that you do *not* own yourself, then what possible objection can you raise to *anything* that the state may do to you?" We then proceed to an examination of the case of *Dred Scott v. Sandford.*

The question of whether Dred Scott was a self-owning individual, or the property of another, is the same question at the core of the debate on *abortion.* Is the fetus a self-owning person, or an extension of the property boundaries of the mother? The same property analysis can be used to distinguish "victimizing" from "victimless" crimes: murder, rape, arson, burglary, battery, theft, and the like, are victimizing crimes because someone's property boundaries were violated. In a victimless crime, by contrast, no trespass to a property interest occurs. If one pursues the substance of the "issues" that make up political and legal debates today, one always finds a property question at stake: is person "x" entitled to make decisions over what is his, or will the state restrain his decision-making in some way? Regulating what people can and cannot put into their bodies, or how they are to conduct their business or social activities, or how they are to educate their children, are all centered around property questions.

"Property" is not simply some social invention, like Emily Post's guide to etiquette, but a way of describing conditions that are essential to *all* living things. Every living thing must occupy space and consume energy from outside itself if it is to survive, and it must do so *to the exclusion of all other living things on the planet.* I didn't dream this up. My thinking was not consulted before the life system developed. The world was operating on the property principle when I arrived and, like the rest of us, I had to work out my answers to that most fundamental, pragmatic of all social questions: *who gets to make decisions about what?* The essence of "ownership" is to be found in *control*: who gets to be the ultimate decision maker about people and "things" in the world?

Observe the rest of nature: trees, birds, fish, plants, other mammals, bacteria, all stake out claims to *space* and sources of *energy* in the world, and will defend such claims against intruders, particularly members of their own species. This is not because they are mean-spirited or uncooperative: quite the contrary, many of us have discovered that *cooperation* is a great way of *increasing* the availability of the energy we need to live well. We have found out that, if we will respect the property claims of one another and work together, each of us can enjoy more property in our lives than if we try to function independently of one another. Such a discovery has permitted us to create economic systems.

There is no way that I could have produced, by myself, the computer upon which I am writing this article. Had I devoted my entire life to the undertaking, I would have been unable even to have conceived of its technology. Many other men and women, equally unable to have undertaken the task by themselves, cooperated – without even knowing one another – in its creation. Lest you think that my writing would have to have been accomplished through the use of a pencil, think again: I would also have been unable to produce a pencil on my own, as Leonard Read once illustrated in a wonderful, brief essay.

Such cooperative undertakings have been possible because of a truth – acknowledged by students of marketplace economic systems, particularly the Austrians – about human nature: *each of us acts only in anticipation of being better off afterwards as a result of our actions.* Toward whatever ends we choose to act – and such ends are constantly rearranging their priorities within us – their satisfaction is always expressed in terms inextricably tied to decision making over something one owns (or seeks to own). Whether I wish to acquire some item of wealth, or to give it away; whether I choose to write some great novel or paint some wondrous work of art; or whether I just wish to lie around and look at flowers, each such act is premised on the fact that we cannot act in the world without doing so through property interests. It is in anticipation of being able to more fully express our sense of what is important to us, both materially and spiritually, that we cooperate with one another.

"Property" also provides a means for maximizing both *individual liberty* and *peace* in society. For once we identify who the owner of some item of property is, that person's will is inviolate as to such property interest. He or she can do what they choose *with respect to what is theirs*. If I own a barn, I can set fire to it should I so choose. If I must first get another's permission, such other person is the owner. Individual liberty means that my decision making is immune from the coercion of others, and coercion is always expressed in terms of property trespasses.

At the same time, the property principle *limits* the scope of my decision making by confining it to that which is mine to control. This is why problems such as industrial "pollution" are usually misconceived, reflecting the truth of Pynchon's earlier quote. A factory owner who fails to confine the unwanted byproducts of his activities to his own land, is *not* behaving as a property *owner*, but as a *trespasser.* Economists have an apt phrase for this: *socializing the costs*. He is behaving like any other collectivist, choosing to extend his decision making over the property of *others*!

But not all of us choose to pursue our self-interests through cooperation with others. Cooperation can exist only when our relationships with others are on a *voluntary* basis which, in turn, requires a mutual respect for the inviolability of one another's property boundaries. Those who seek to advance their interests in non-cooperative ways, create another system: *politics.* If you can manage to drag your mind away from the drivel placed there by your high school civics class teacher, and look at political systems in terms of what they in fact do, you will discover this: *every such system is founded upon a disrespect for privately owned property! All* political systems are collectivist in nature, for each presumes a rightful authority to violate the will – including confiscation – of property owners. One can no more conceive of "politics" without "theft" than of "war" without "violence."

Every political system is *defined* in terms of how property is to be controlled in a given society. In *communist* systems, the state confiscates all the means of production. In less-ambitious *socialist* systems, the state confiscates the more important means of production (e.g., railroads, communications, steel mills, etc.). Under *fascism*, "title" to property remains in private hands, but "control" over such property is exercised by the state. Thus, fascism has given us state *regulatory* systems, in which property owners – be they farmers, homeowners, or businesses – have the illusion of *owning* what they believe to be "theirs," while the state increasingly exercises the real ownership authority (i.e., control). In *welfare state* systems, the state confiscates part of the income of individuals and redistributes it to others.

As stated earlier, *property* is an existential fact. Whatever the society in which we live, *someone* will make determinations as to who will live where, what resources can be consumed by whom (and when), and how such property will be controlled. Such decisions can either be made by *individual property owners* – over what is theirs to control – or by the *state* presuming the authority to control the lives of each of us. When such decisions are made by the state, it is claiming ownership over our lives.

It is at this point that I let the students in on the secret the political establishment would prefer not to have revealed: the 13th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution did not *end* slavery, but only *nationalized* it! That most Americans acquiesce in such political arrangements, and take great offense should anyone dare to explain their implications, has led me to the conclusion that America may be the last of the collectivist societies to wither away. Most Americans, sad to say, seem unprepared to deny the state's authority to direct their lives and property as political officials see fit. The reason for this, as my first-day question to students is designed to elicit, is that most of us refuse to insist upon self-ownership.

We may, of course, choose to accept our role as state-owned chattels, particularly if we are well-treated by our masters. We may be so conditioned in our obeisance that, like cattle entering the slaughterhouse, we may pause to lick the hand of the butcher out of gratitude for having been well cared for. On the other hand, we may decide to reclaim our self-ownership by taking back the control over our lives that we have long since abandoned.

Perhaps the insanity of our social destructiveness – including the Bush Administration's deranged declaration of a permanent war against the rest of the world – will bring about an examination of alternative ways of living together in conditions of peace and liberty. Our political systems cannot bring about such harmonious and life-sustaining ways because they are premised on a rejection of the principle of self-ownership. In a society of self-owning individuals, there would be no place for politicians, bureaucrats, and other state functionaries. Like the rest of us, they would have to confine their lives to minding their own business, and deriving whatever benefit they could from persons who chose to cooperate with them.

There is one person who can restore you to a state of self-ownership, however, and that person is *you.* To do so, you need only assert your claim, not as some empty gesture, but in full understanding of the existential meaning of such a claim, including the willingness to take full control of and responsibility for your life. While your claim will likely evoke cries of contempt from many, you may also find yourself energized by a life force that permeates all of nature; an *élan vital* that reminds us that life manifests itself only through individuals, and not as collective monstrosities; that life belongs to the *living*, not to the state or any other abstraction.

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