

VIEWPOINT

Freedom And Health: Life Under Tyranny Is Very Hazardous To One's Well-Being

BY STEPHEN MOORE
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The latest survey by Freedom House indicates political freedom is spreading across the globe. Today, less than one-third of the world's population live in nations that are "not free," whereas throughout most of history well over half of all people lived in countries without basic freedoms.

Three of the nations listed as least free in the world are Marxist-Leninist. So much for the "workers' paradise" myth.

Meanwhile, the Cato Institute recently published its annual Economic Freedom Index, which finds that nations are also allowing more economic freedom.

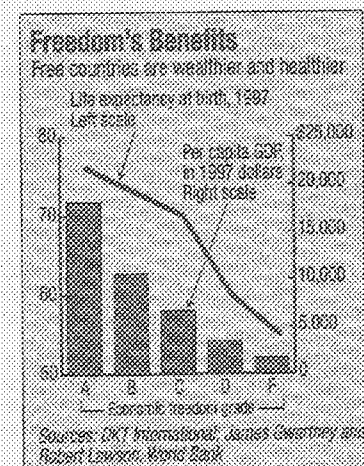
Tax rates are on average about 20 percentage points lower in most nations today than 20 years ago. Trade is freer.

National governments are starting to spend less of their nations' resources.

Monetary policies are more stable, though there is a lot of work still to be done.

Public sectors are gradually selling off state-owned enterprises.

The simultaneous expansion of political and economic freedoms is good news first and foremost because freedom is an end in itself.



To be unshackled from the chains of government tyranny has, arguably, been mankind's ultimate quest through the ages.

In recent decades, researchers have demonstrated that freedom and progress go hand in hand.

In their Cato Institute study, professors James Gwartney, Robert Lawson and Walter Block rank 125 nations on economic freedom and then grade them, from A for the most free to F for the least.

The per-capita income of the freest nations is \$18,100. The per capita income of the least-free nations is \$1,700, less than one-tenth the amount.

As Adam Smith both understood and predicted 200 years ago, market-based economic policies, or what he called "the freedom to truck, barter and exchange," are powerful engines for growth.

But freedom is also powerfully associated with something else: better health and longer life. People live much longer in free nations, while life is tragically short for those who live under the most restrictive governmental regimes.

Life expectancy is the best single measure of health in a society, because it captures within it all sorts of other trends of health improvement, such as infant mortality, disease rates, quality of medical care for the population and nutrition.

That people in free countries have life expectancies almost two decades longer than for those without freedom (76 years vs. 57 years) stunningly validates the thesis that freedom creates greater wealth and greater health.

Examining what happened in nations divided into free and not-free pairs after World War II also confirms this relationship.

South Koreans today enjoy much longer life expectancy than North Koreans. Taiwan has longer life expectancy than China. And West Germans were outliving their East German counterparts by the time the Berlin Wall fell.

Advocates of liberty can take great comfort in this documented evidence that more freedom means longer and richer lives. It refutes a seductive argument, namely, that certain restrictions might produce a better economic and social result.

For years prominent scholars and leaders fretted over the perceived dilemma between freedom and efficiency.

American economist John Kenneth Galbraith and Lee Kwan Yew, former president of Singapore, among others, promoted the idea that we should sacrifice some freedoms to improve economic efficiency and output. And, along these lines, we still hear American intellectuals tout the universal health care system in Cuba.

But this trade-off theory is false. The freest people are not just the richest, but they lead the healthiest and longest lives.

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