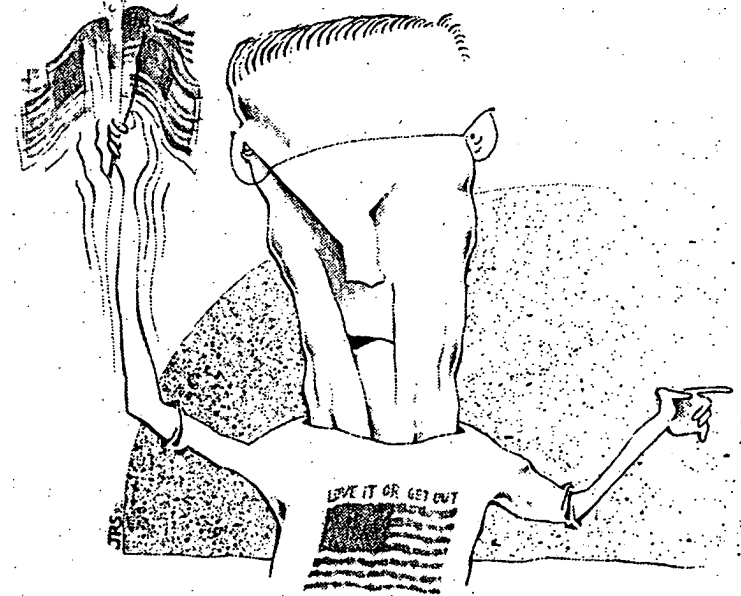


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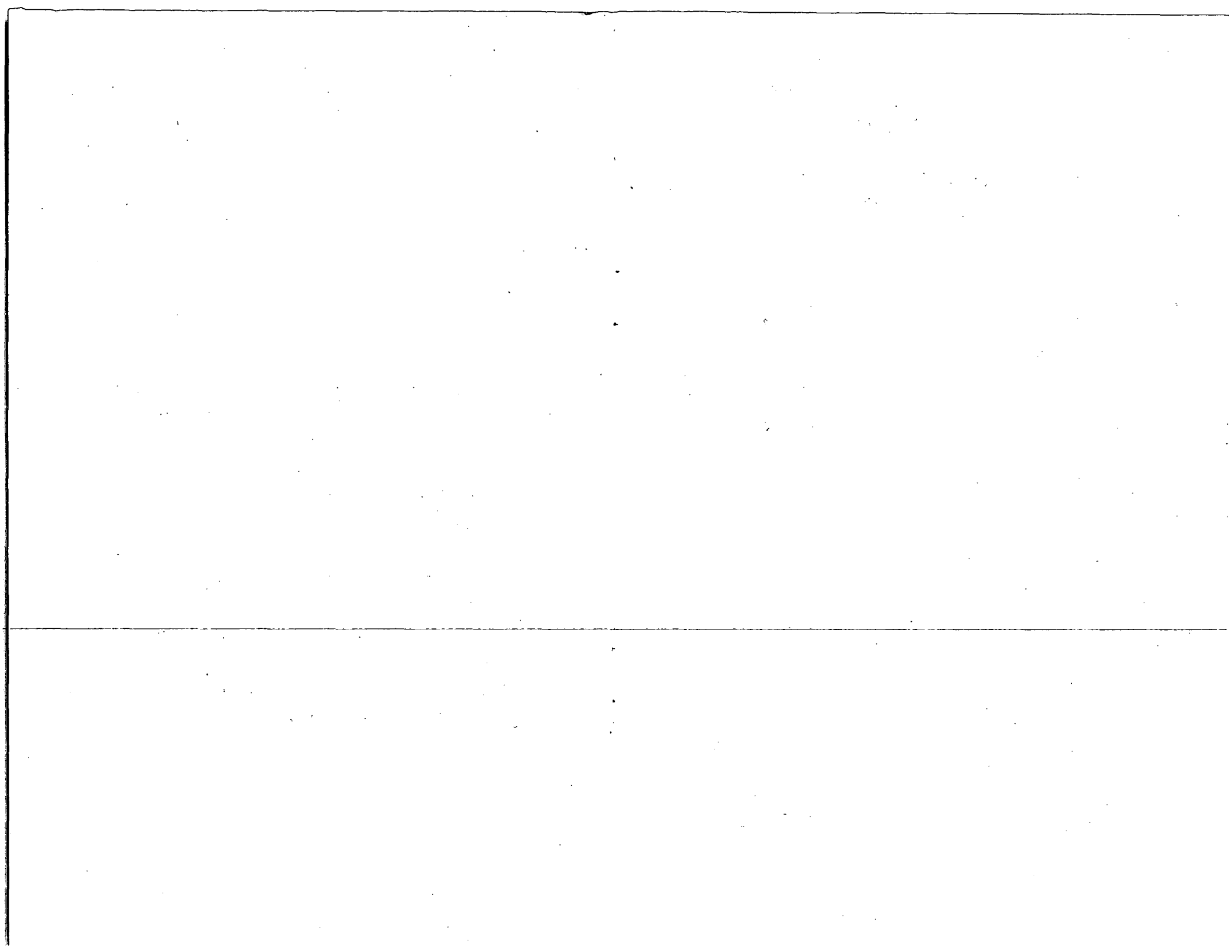
In this pamphlet, Chaz Bufe looks closely at the common belief that the United States is a "free country," comparing rhetoric with reality. He considers common conceptions of freedom, why so few "freedom loving Americans" actually have any understanding of freedom, and why so few have any respect for it. Bufe traces this lack of understanding and lack of respect to the various American institutions responsible for the wholesale indoctrination of the public. He concludes by examining the nature of freedom, especially aspects of it which are never mentioned in "the miseducation system" or the corporate media.

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Chaz Bufe

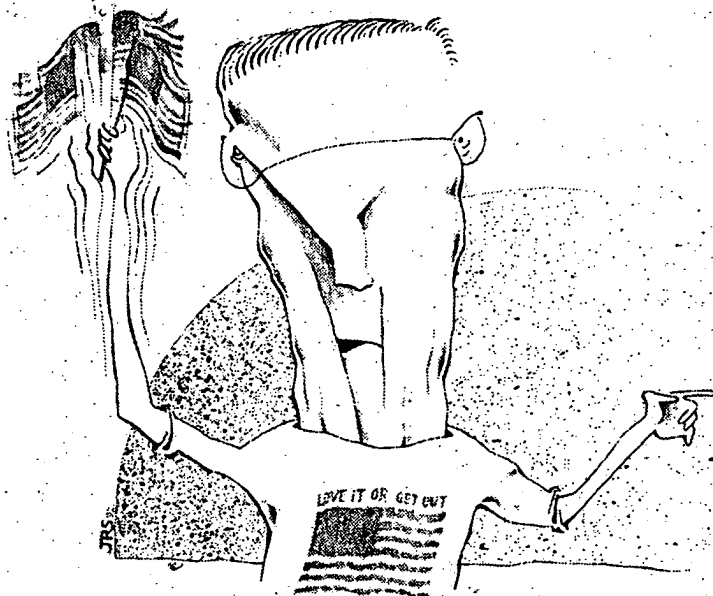
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Recommended Reading

- Albert, Michael and Robin Hahnel. *Looking Forward: Participatory Economics in the 21st Century*. Boston: South End, 1990.
- Albert, Michael. *Moving Forward: Program for a Participatory Economy*. Oakland: AK Press, 2001.
- Berkman, Alexander. *ABC of Anarchism*. London: Freedom Press, n.d.
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the negative freedoms, such as freedom of speech and freedom of the press. To make matters worse, once in power marxists don't even deliver on the promise of positive freedom (just as their capitalist counterparts don't deliver on the promise of the negative freedoms). Instead, they become, to use Milovan Djilas's term, "the new class," that is, the new privileged class. So, under marxism freedom in both its negative and positive senses is illusory.

Anarchism is the only other tendency that has insisted on equal positive freedom. And anarchists¹⁶ are alone in insisting on both equal positive and equal negative freedom, that is equal access to resources and equal freedom from restraint; limited only by the similar freedom of others. It's beyond the scope of this pamphlet to consider this matter in any detail, but it's well worth noting that anarchists have considered these things at length and have written a number of very useful books on how to achieve real freedom. Some of these works are listed in the recommended reading section at the end of this pamphlet.

Conclusion

For the vast majority of us, American "freedom" consists of unremitting regimentation at school and work; unremitting indoctrination from the miseducation system, corporate media, and authoritarian religions; working at jobs we often loathe; having no control over our work lives—our pay, work hours, working conditions, what we produce, how we produce it; stress from being overworked, underpaid, and in constant fear of job loss and homelessness; humiliating intrusions into our private lives by employers and the government (goaded on by vicious religious zealots); lack of the *time* necessary to taking real advantage of the "negative" freedoms (freedom of speech, freedom of the press, etc.); lack of the *resources* necessary to taking real advantage of the "negative" freedoms; and lack of the resources necessary to making real choices in virtually all other areas of life (schools, housing, transportation, travel . . .).

And, in compensation for all this, we have the "freedom" to enter the voting booth every two years to vote for the millionaires who will become our new masters.

16. "Anarchists" refers to those who understand the theory and work to make it real, and not to those foolish souls who are attracted to the type of "anarchism" portrayed in the corporate media, an "anarchism" that equals chaos, amoral egotism, and blind destructiveness.

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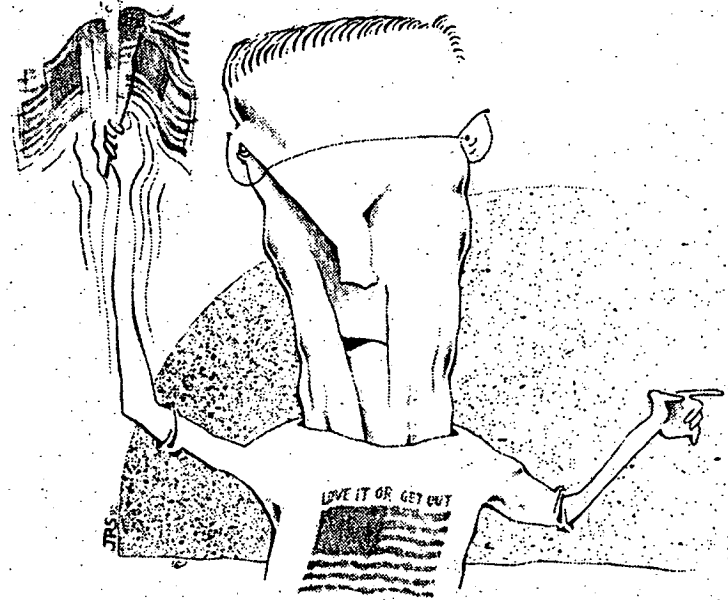
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(social democrats) and the so-called Libertarians. Both have the same defect: their vision of liberty is incomplete. Liberals are often at least dimly aware of the necessity of resources to the achievement of freedom, but they do not draw the logical conclusions from this. Instead of attempting to rid the world of capitalism and privilege, they simply seek to mitigate the worst abuses of capitalism via governmental means. Even at best, as in the Scandinavian countries, such an approach leaves a large majority of the people with limited access to resources (in comparison with the rich) and saddles them with an intrusive government bureaucracy.

The other group concerned with civil liberties, the so-called Libertarians, are entirely blind to the relationship of resources to freedom. In fact, they glorify the mechanism that denies equal positive freedom to all: capitalism. (The stilted, bloated novels by the pompous, literarily challenged egomaniac, Ayn Rand, provide good examples of this.) In recent years, this group's political party has even retreated from its earlier calls for the abolition of the state (so as to bring on the "paradise" of unfettered, cutthroat capitalism), and now wants to retain the police and military functions of the state, while eliminating its social welfare functions (further widening the already huge gap between the freedoms of the rich and the poor). This is in apparent recognition of the fact that capitalism requires institutionalized violence to maintain itself,¹⁵ that the state is a convenient form of such violence, and that the state has historically been a faithful servant of the rich. To sum up, the "Libertarians" are not concerned (and in fact are antagonistic to) the freedom of the vast majority; the only freedom they're interested in is that of capitalists. They confuse freedom of capital with human freedom; and if push ever comes to shove, one knows in advance which side they'll come down on—they'll fight to the death to preserve capitalism and to prevent real, full freedom from ever taking root.

But what about equal freedom? What about positive freedom (equal access to resources)? Doesn't anyone advocate these things?

Only two political tendencies are concerned with achievement of equal positive freedom. The first is marxism. However, for the most part marxists conceive of freedom *only* as positive freedom; that is *only* as access to resources, and, routinely violated paper guarantees aside, they're by and large indifferent or actively hostile (invariably so once in power) to

15. Earlier "Libertarian" theorists, such as Murray Rothbard, were well aware of capitalism's need for institutionalized violence. Rothbard's solution, in the absence of the state, was the creation of private police forces and private prisons.

You Call This Freedom?

One hears, sees, or reads it every day. Often several times a day. It's inescapable. And it's an almost unquestioned article of faith: the United States is a free country.

But is it really? And what is meant by "free"?

Civil Liberties—Freedom from Restraint

The more enlightened part of the American public—perhaps as much as 15% or 20% of the whole—regards freedom in purely negative terms, as freedom from restraint, intrusion, and compulsion. This consists of such things as freedom of speech, freedom of movement, and freedom of association. In short, the freedom to do or say anything that one wishes as long as one does not directly harm or intrude on others.

Many people who believe in freedom in this sense find it very troubling that the government routinely violates supposedly guaranteed individual freedoms whenever it feels threatened; or even at its whim. Examples of such violations abound in U.S. history, from the first days of the republic to the present day. To cite but a few: under John Adams, congress passed the Alien and Sedition Acts, which gave the government license to arrest and jail those who criticized it. It wasn't the courts that saved Americans from these totalitarian laws; rather, they expired, due to a built-in time limit, while Thomas Jefferson, who had opposed their passage, was president.

Another pertinent example is the Espionage Act of 1917. Under it, criticism of the government was again declared illegal, and the victims of this law numbered in the thousands, many of whom were imprisoned for lengthy terms for exercising the supposedly guaranteed right of free speech. Victims included innumerable members of the Industrial Workers of the World, Socialist Party presidential candidate Eugene V. Debs, and the great Mexican anarchist and revolutionary Ricardo Flores Magón.

Shortly after World War I, "criminal syndicalism" laws were passed prohibiting unions and their members from advocating and organizing for the dissolution of government and worker management of the economy.

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(Instead, only business unions of the lickspittle AFL type, which accepted and supported capitalism, were permitted.) Again, this was a gross violation of the rights of free speech and free assembly, and thousands of IWW members were jailed under these laws throughout the post-WWI period, often for lengthy terms.

Still another example, this time aimed at freedom of movement and freedom of association, was FDR's executive order mandating the internment of Japanese-Americans in concentration camps during World War II. Of course, the courts found that this was perfectly legal.

During the Vietnam War, the FBI's COINTELPRO campaign was specifically designed to silence opposition through the use of wiretapping, blackmail (of, for instance, Martin Luther King), agents provocateur, framing activists (such as Black Panther Geronimo Pratt and American Indian Movement [AIM] leader Leonard Peltier) on false charges, and on more than one occasion murdering activists (such as Black Panthers Fred Hampton and Mark Clark, murdered by Chicago police in an FBI-planned raid, and dozens of AIM members murdered on the Lakota reservation during 1970s by goon squads operating with FBI help). Because these violations of individual rights were carried out secretly, none of the agents responsible for these violations were ever brought to justice.

At present, we're seeing a renewal of COINTELPRO-type FBI activities directed against peace and political activists. In an eerie echo of WWI-era hysteria and its "espionage" act (virtually none of the victims of which were engaging in espionage), this time the excuse is "terrorism," even though the government must be well aware that peace and left-wing political activists pose absolutely no "terrorist" threat whatsoever, and that the only "terrorist" acts which have resulted in bodily injury or death that have taken place in this country for the last three decades have all, with the sole exception of the "Unabomber" attacks, been carried out either by the extreme racist right (for example, the murder of Denver talk show host Alan Berg by The Order, and the Oklahoma City federal building bombing), right-wing "right to life" religious fanatics (numerous bombings of abortion clinics and shootings of abortion providers), and, in the most spectacular acts, by right-wing Muslim religious extremists.

More routinely, day in and day out, the government violates the individual's right to be free from intrusion, the right to be left alone as long as one is not intruding on anyone else. These violations of individual rights are codified in the laws against victimless or consensual "crimes,"

uct of the collective labor of hundreds of generations: the roads, bridges, houses, factories, workshops, mines, mills, machines, railways, airports, dams, power plants—in sum, *everything* produced by the members of dead-and-gone generations. Again, why should only a few—especially a few who by and large do no useful work—be the primary beneficiaries of this massive amount of collective labor by past generations?

To say that they inherited their wealth and that it's therefore rightfully theirs is to say no more than that the sons and daughters of those who have unfairly benefitted should also unfairly benefit. And that original unfair benefit was based on land grabs, violence, the enslavement of others, the swindling of others, the suppression of competition, and other forms of low cunning. Should such behaviors be rewarded in perpetuity?

But what of "self-made men"? In the first place, a large majority of wealth is inherited rather than "made." In the second place, if you look closely you'll find that most "self-made men" had a head start on the rest of us—they came from the upper income strata. And in the third place, most of these individuals' success comes not from innovative genius, but from taking advantage of the genius of others. Bill Gates, the richest man on Earth, is a good example of this. Gates succeeded not through his own inventiveness, but by recognizing and buying the intellectual products of others on the cheap (e.g., DOS), and through monopolistic practices, exploitation of labor (e.g., the "permatemps" who often work for years at Microsoft, but with no job security and no benefits), and the ruthless suppression of competition (e.g., Netscape).¹⁴ Linus Torvald, the inventor of Linux, has made a far greater contribution to computing than Gates, but we all know which of the two is incredibly wealthy.

In the end, "self-made men" not only normally have an economic head start on the rest of us, but they also normally make their money by taking advantage of the work and talents of others; and so they're no more deserving of great wealth than the parasites who inherit it.

Advocates of Freedom

Many groups and political tendencies are concerned with civil liberties, with freedom from restraint. The most prominent are left liberals

14. Gates attempted to destroy Netscape by integrating Microsoft's web browser, Internet Explorer, into the Windows operating system. (At the time, Netscape's flagship product was its web browser.) There was no logical reason to do this, unless one counts attempt-

and the rest of us,¹² and that the day to day lives of a good majority of Americans are becoming less and less free; our time is being eaten up by the steadily increasing work week; we have fewer and fewer resources with which to exercise our scant “negative” freedoms; and, indeed, we have fewer and fewer resources with which to make choices in *any* aspect of our lives. To reiterate: lack of resources is making us less and less free. If we had even the most minimal control of our work lives and the products of our labor, there’s no way that we would put up with such appalling realities.¹³

Corporate Justifications

There is no lack of bought-and-paid-for intellectuals and commentators to justify this state of affairs, and to a great extent they’ve succeeded. They’ve even (with plentiful help from the miseducation system, corporate media, and patriarchal religions) managed to convince a good majority of Americans that the status quo is “freedom.”

One of their main, and particularly grotesque, arguments is that private property in general and capitalism in particular (and the extreme inequality in access to resources that comes with it) are necessary to freedom. We’ve already seen that unequal access to resources (that is, lack of positive freedom) makes a mockery of civil liberties and that it destroys freedom in day to day life. But let’s take a closer look at private property and capitalism.

In the first place, private property consists largely of land and natural resources. Who created these? No one. So why should only a few benefit from them? The other part of what makes up private property is the prod-

12. At the time Ronald Reagan took office, the top 1% of the population owned approximately 30% of the national wealth. Since then there has been a massive transfer of wealth from the bottom and middle to the top economic strata, with the wealth of the top 1% increasing over the past quarter century by more than the combined worth of the bottom 50%. To put this another way, the extremely wealthy are becoming far wealthier, the middle class is being squeezed out of existence, and the already wretched condition of the poor is becoming ever worse.

13. Self-employment is a largely illusory alternative. Most self-employment attempts fail, due in large part to inadequate capitalization (that is, lack of economic resources); the self-employed often work more hours than those employed by others; they often work seven days a week; and cash flow (that is, lack of steady income) is a constant nightmare for many, probably most, self-employed people.

gambling, and “sodomy.” The oft-times extremely vicious penalties for violating these laws have ruined literally millions of lives, with many of those who violated them serving far longer terms than rapists and murderers.

One might also mention that the government jealously guards its “right” to press its citizens into involuntary servitude via conscription. The fact that this is an obvious violation of the 13th Amendment’s prohibition of “involuntary servitude,” and that the courts have repeatedly ruled that this form of involuntary servitude is not, somehow, involuntary servitude, serves to point out the weakness of the supposed guardians of individual rights: written constitutional guarantees and the courts that interpret those guarantees.

Occasionally, as in the 2003 supreme court decision striking down the sodomy laws, the courts will uphold individual rights. But the courts tend to do this only when public opinion has shifted powerfully against the laws in question, and the government feels no compelling need to maintain them in force. (The supreme court upheld the sodomy laws as recently as 1986; since then public opinion has strongly shifted against such laws.) In most other cases, the courts feel no compunction in declaring that black is white and that written constitutional guarantees do not mean what they plainly state. To cite a few additional examples (beyond the courts’ upholding of conscription laws) showing how near-useless the courts are as guardians of our rights, one might consider the Dred Scott decision of 1857, in which the supreme court decided that black people aren’t human; the decisions upholding the Espionage Act of 1917 and its savaging of freedom of speech and those who practiced it; and the numerous decisions upholding the government’s “right” to intrude into the private lives of individuals via laws outlawing private drug use, consensual sex acts (such as prostitution), and gambling.

The courts and paper promises are not in any real sense guarantees of individual rights; and federal, state, and local governments continue to routinely violate our most basic human rights (especially the right to be left alone so long as one is not intruding on or harming someone else).

How did this sorry state of affairs come to be? How could such gross violations of individual liberty be so commonly accepted, in fact supported, in a country whose citizens supposedly value freedom? The answer is simple: a large majority of Americans passively accept this state of affairs in sheep-like silence, and at least a sizable minority actively support the government’s violations of individual rights. The few who have the courage to stand up against these violations, and the authoritarian herd supporting them, are often crushed like bugs.

A recent and tragic example is provided by the government's treatment of Peter McWilliams, civil libertarian and author of *Ain't Nobody's Business*. McWilliams, who was diagnosed in 1996 with AIDS and cancer, began using medical marijuana to combat the nausea caused by his AIDS drugs. Due to his high-profile status as a defender of individual liberties and medical marijuana use, he was targeted by the DEA, which invaded his home, trashed it (a very common practice), and arrested him on marijuana cultivation charges. At his 1998 trial, the judge refused to allow a "medical necessity" defense, and thus refused to hear both scientific evidence of marijuana's efficacy in combatting nausea and any mention of California's 1996 law permitting the use of medical marijuana. McWilliams was convicted, and after his family put up their houses to raise his bail (\$250,000—higher than for most rapists and armed robbers), he was released on bail, but on the condition that he not use medical marijuana to combat his nausea. In 2000, while his case was still on appeal and he was still under the restriction prohibiting his nausea medication, he died as a result of choking on his own vomit.

The "Freedom" of Voting

Again, how could such a horrible thing come to pass? How did our fellow citizens become so degraded as to support such horrendous misuse of government power? How is it that so many Americans have so little understanding of, and so little concern about their own freedoms and those of their fellows?

In all probability, a good part of the answer lies in what they consider freedom to be. It seems that a great many, probably a good majority, of our fellow Americans do not consider freedom from restraint and freedom from intrusion as fundamental. No. What they see as fundamental to freedom—and many seem to regard this as freedom's only component—is the right to vote. Numerous consequences flow from this.

The primary result of believing that freedom consists only of voting for one's rulers is the belief that anything the government does is OK as long as the government is elected and enacts its decisions into law.¹ In individual behavior, this attitude manifests itself as passive acceptance of

The rich enjoy an extraordinary degree of freedom at everyone else's expense. There is no way around this, given that freedom depends on access to resources, that the world has finite resources, and that, though these resources are great, they're almost entirely in the hands of the rich.

The "Freedom" of Those Who Work

For the rest of us, things are very different than for the rich. Most of us have very little control over our daily lives. We're forced to work long, numbing hours, often at jobs we hate, just to pay the bills. With the real unemployment rate exceeding 10% (counting "discouraged workers"—those who, often after months or years, have given up trying to find work), those of us who work for a living have a powerful incentive to continue working, even at jobs we hate. The fear of homelessness and destitution is ever lurking in the background, with millions upon millions of us one paycheck away from being out on the street.

At work, we have virtually no control over our lives—freedom is almost totally absent from a good third of our waking hours. On the job, we're often subject to a myriad of idiotic rules (even as to when and how often we can go to the restroom); we usually have no say in the decisions about what we produce; we usually have no say, either, on how we produce things; we have very little control over our pay, and because of the fear of unemployment and the pathetic state of the U.S. unions we often have to take insultingly low wages; we're often forced to work overtime (and sometimes cheated of overtime pay); and we're often subjected to humiliating intrusions into our private lives (especially drug tests and, often, forced participation in 12-step religious-indoctrination programs under the guise of "treatment").

The near-total lack of control of most Americans over their work lives can be seen in the fact that productivity has been steadily rising since World War II (1% to 3% per year, according to Juliet Schor's excellent book, *The Overworked American*), while the average number of hours worked per year in the U.S. is now the highest in the industrialized world (surpassing even Japan), and average wages (in constant dollars) have actually *fallen* approximately 15% since the early 1970s.

To make matters worse, taxes fall most heavily on those who work for a living. Average taxpayers now pay over one-third of their wages as taxes, while many of the rich pay far lower taxes or, in some cases, no taxes at all thanks to their ability to take advantage of loopholes. The end result of all this is that there is a steadily widening gap between the rich

1. Not that many government supporters are all that concerned about the "sanctity of the law"—all too many are more than ready to support gross violations of it by the government when the target is a group or individual they dislike.

To put this another way, lack of positive freedom, lack of equal access to resources, makes a mockery of all of the freedoms from restraint—freedom of speech, freedom of the press, freedom of travel, etc.—because unequal access to resources *is itself* a tremendous restraint. If freedom is to be real, equal freedom—in both its positive (access to resources) and negative (freedom from restraint) aspects—is mandatory. Absolute freedom is impossible (though the rich enjoy something close to it, at every-one else's expense); the best that can be hoped for is *equal* freedom.

The Freedom of The Rich

The foregoing applies to the “pursuit of happiness” as well. The rich are much freer than the rest of us in that area, too; in fact they're freer in virtually all areas of life. They're far freer not only to exercise their civil liberties, but to travel, to send their kids to the best schools, to live where and how they choose, buy any consumer goods they want, eat the best, most expensive foods, etc., etc. And they have much more time to do all these things than the rest of us, because they do not have to work. Some do, but it's a matter of choice for them.

The rich are also very nearly free to flout the law. William F. Buckley provided one flamboyant example of this a number of years ago when he sailed his yacht outside U.S. territorial waters so that he could smoke pot without fear of the U.S. authorities, and then bragged about it on his TV show. In day-to-day life, the rich are much less likely than the rest of us ever to be bothered by the police, as cops are always much more reluctant to kick in the doors of the wealthy (if they can get past the perimeter gates) than they are the doors of those who do useful work. And, in those rare circumstances in which the rich are charged with crimes, they can hire the best defense lawyers to get them off, sometimes on what seem like open-and-shut murder charges, such as the O.J. Simpson case. (In contrast, the poor often have to rely on overworked public defenders who normally plea bargain cases¹⁰; as a result, a large number of poor people are convicted of, or plead guilty to, crimes they never committed.¹¹)

10. A common, sleazy practice of prosecutors is to pile baseless or nearly baseless charges on a defendant (who doesn't have the resources to fight all the charges) to coerce the defendant into pleading guilty to one or two of the charges.

11. A good illustration of this is the spate (hundreds of cases) of rape convictions which have been overturned in recent years because of new DNA testing. Revealingly, in at least a few cases prosecutors have opposed the freeing of those exonerated by DNA evidence.

intrusive, authoritarian government violations of individual rights, or in many cases goose-stepping enthusiasm for those violations (in cases in which the goose-steppers dislike those targeted by the government). This hypnotic fixation on voting is so strong that most people don't even notice glaring contradictions, such as “making the world safe for democracy” (during World War I) while suppressing free speech and free association, and the intermittent practice of forcing multitudes into involuntary servitude in the armed forces to keep our country “free.”

Institutional Support for Voting

The reasons for this hypnotic fixation on voting are not difficult to see. The first, though not necessarily the most important, is the miseducation system in the United States. Its backbone is a system of rigid routine cued by bells and buzzers, inculcation of competition (for grades² and teachers' favor) rather than cooperation, participation in mandatory rituals of subordination (e.g., the Pledge of Allegiance), endless indoctrination that the U.S. is a free country (with heavy emphasis on the right to vote), and mindless rote memorization.³ Add to this that critical thinking and skepticism are systematically discouraged—it's no accident that year after year U.S. students score very badly in science compared with students in other countries—and one can only conclude that the U.S. miseducation system is succeeding very well in its mission: production of automatons who do not think for themselves, who are barely even *capable* of thinking for themselves, who submissively accept humiliating government intrusions into their lives (e.g., urine tests), and who accept hierarchy, gross economic inequality, an artificially low standard of living, a huge, parasitic military sucking the economic life from the country, and their own subordinate places in a rigidifying class structure as normal, natural, and indeed inevitable—and, most amazing of all, who consider themselves “free” (because of the right to vote).

2. This is a powerful, near-continual inducement to seeing others as rivals and to seeing their bad fortune [poor grades] as one's good fortune.

3. This last is perhaps most pronounced in history classes, which rarely consist of anything more than memorization of dates and the names of “great men,” in conjunction with a carefully sanitized version of U.S. and world history focusing on the deeds of the “great men.””

The second important factor in the fixation upon voting as “freedom” is the corporate mass media, which also presents hierarchy, gross economic inequality, a highly intrusive government, militarism, plus religious irrationality and a class structure (though never identified as such) as normal, natural, and inevitable. Again, as in the miseducation system, one finds a focus on “great men” (especially, as in CNN’s coverage of the Iraq invasion, military men). Again, one finds drumbeat repetition of the claim that the U.S. is a “free” country. From this, of course, flows the (generally unstated) conclusion that present social, political, and economic conditions constitute freedom.⁴ Then, there’s the day-in-day-out obsessive coverage of elected officials and elections. This, combined with the constant repetition that the U.S. is a “free” country (and respectful coverage of the courts as freedom’s arbiters and guarantors) provides powerful reinforcement of the belief that elections in and of themselves constitute freedom and that freedom is something delivered by the state.

One might add that the corporate media almost invariably present all radical alternatives to the present socioeconomic system as threatening to “our freedom,” and the advocates of such alternatives as being dangerous and/or crazy.⁵ A good example of this is the corporate media’s treatment of anarchism. There is a near-total media blackout of anarchism’s most respected spokesman, the renowned linguist, Noam Chomsky. Instead, the corporate media focuses on fringe figures such as the murderous schizophrenic, Ted Kaczynski (the “Unabomber”), and advocates of the ridiculous, such as primitivist John Zerzan, and presents them to the public (with generally not even barely concealed ridicule) as the face of anarchism.

Religion, more especially authoritarian, patriarchal religion, is the third primary component in the machine which churns out the indoctrinated automatons who equate voting with freedom. Patriarchal religions, such as Islam, fundamentalist Christianity, Catholicism, and Mormonism are extremely hierarchical and authoritarian in nature. In these religions, God, in almost military manner, gives orders and his lieutenants convey them down the chain of command to the laity. (That’s the theory; some-

4. This conclusion was presented in bare-faced form, and heavily promoted, as the (now fortunately nearly forgotten) “end of history” conjecture in the 1990s; this conjecture stated that the late phase capitalism under which we live is as near to utopia as we’ll ever get. That this absurd thesis received considerable, respectful coverage is a good indication of the subservience of the media to the socio-political agenda of its corporate owners.

5. Formerly, the primary tactic (which is still occasionally employed) was to present the false dichotomy of “free enterprise” vs. Soviet-style “communism,” as if no other alternatives were possible.

Positive Freedom

Leaving this dismal situation behind for a moment, let’s consider a very important aspect of freedom that is virtually never mentioned in the United States: what Emma Goldman called “the freedom to,” that is; the access to the resources necessary to making the “negative” freedoms (freedom of speech, freedom of travel, etc.) meaningful—to put this another way, access to the resources necessary to the freedom to act.

Without this “positive” freedom, freedom from restraint becomes nearly meaningless. As an extreme example, freedom of the press is a mockery to someone who is starving to death. But let’s consider a less extreme example: the situation of the majority in the present-day United States. The top 1% of the population owns considerably more of the national wealth (40%) than the bottom 90% of the population combined (30%, with most of that concentrated toward the top); the top 10% own more than twice as much as the bottom 90% (70% versus 30%); and the bottom 50% own almost nothing—under 10% of the wealth, with almost all of it concentrated in static assets such as cars and heavily mortgaged houses.

As should be blindingly obvious, freedom of speech and freedom of the press are much more real for the rich than for the rest of us. If the rich have something to say and want to make use of freedom of the press, they can simply go out and buy newspapers, publishing companies, radio stations, TV stations, even TV networks and cable and satellite providers. The rest of us, if we have something to say, are reduced to publishing xeroxed zines and pamphlets, putting low-wattage “pirate” radio stations on the air (while running the risk of being fined, having our equipment confiscated, and just possibly going to jail), putting up web sites, producing cable-access TV shows seen by a minuscule number of viewers, and, if we’re willing to make major economic sacrifices, publishing small amounts of paperback books which we’ll have trouble distributing. (Small publishers are at a huge competitive disadvantage vis a vis the few huge corporations that dominate the publishing field.)

Then, if the corporate elite feel the slightest bit threatened, they’ll have no compunction about suppressing the independent press—and, indeed, anyone who dares to publicly disagree with the elite’s political agenda—via their bought-and-paid-for government. And, to add insult to injury, the corporate mass media will be howling for the blood of the accursed dissenters, blathering tired *non sequiturs* about “shouting ‘fire’ in a crowded theater” and the like to stampede the zombified herd.

In the second place, those with unpopular views are sometimes denied their elected positions. A good example is Victor Berger, a member of the Socialist Party who was elected to the U.S. house of representatives in a landslide in 1918, but was denied his seat in 1919 because he was a Socialist who had opposed World War I. Another more contemporary example is Julian Bond, who was denied his seat in the Georgia state assembly in 1965 due to his opposition to the war in Vietnam.

In the third place, the U.S. electoral system is by far the most undemocratic of any in the western democracies. It's set up, from the local to federal levels, as a winner-take-all system which by its very nature has cemented the two-party system in place and which has systematically prevented those holding minority views from having any share of power, no matter how minor. (In contrast, European democracies feature proportional representation, which guarantees legislative seats to all but the smallest political parties.) Further, the electoral college is a national embarrassment which has led on more than one occasion to the presidential candidate who garnered the most votes "losing" the election. And the U.S. senate is elected on the basis of geographic areas (the states) that vary wildly in size and population. This results in extreme inequities, such as Wyoming, with a population of half a million, having the same number of senators as California, with a population of 35 million. Among other things, this makes it very easy for relatively small amounts of corporate money to buy senatorial elections in sparsely populated states, thus increasing even further corporate domination of the political process.

In the fourth place, participation in electoral politics is far from an equal-opportunity affair. With the costs of even county supervisor races often running above \$100,000 and the costs for U.S. house and senate races often costing well up into the millions, electoral politics, above low-level local races, is a game only for the rich. At present, 40 U.S. senators are millionaires, as are dozens of representatives; and virtually all of the rest are far above the median in both wealth and income. Thus the vast majority of those who support the electoral process not only have no control over their rulers, but they're effectively barred, because of their economic status, from becoming one of those rulers. Instead, they're reduced to yanking a lever or marking a card in a voting booth every two years—and because of this "privilege," they consider themselves "free."⁹

9. Some of these defects have been recognized as serious problems since the 19th century. That nothing has been done about them speaks volumes in itself about the undemocratic nature of the American "democratic" process.

how one suspects that the orders originate with the "lieutenants.") In all of these religions, the role of the laity is to obey, period.

The Catholic Church is perhaps the clearest example of hierarchical structure and the dominant/submissive relationship between clergy and laity. Here, "God's" orders are relayed first to the "infallible" pope, and then down the chain of command: cardinals, archbishops, bishops, monsignors, priests—and then to the laity.

It's also highly important to note that all of these patriarchal religions are virulently anti-intellectual (notwithstanding the Catholic Church's intellectual pretensions), and all systematically discourage rational inquiry and skepticism. All too often, this "discouragement" has taken physical form, such as the Inquisition, the persecution of Galileo, the burning at the stake of Giordano Bruno and other heretics, the Index of Prohibited Books, etc., etc.

In all of these religions, great emphasis is placed on blind acceptance of the words of "holy" men and "holy" books. In all of them, blind faith—that is, *not* using one's ability to think, *not* using one's ability to reason—is presented as a *virtue*. Martin Luther stated the matter quite plainly in his *Table Talk*: "Reason is the greatest enemy that faith has."

Then add in the fact that all of these religions teach that it's the duty of their respective flocks to impose their beliefs (their "morality") on others, either directly through violence or through the threat of violence embodied in the law and the governments that enforce it, and it's little wonder that the members of these religions have, overall, so little respect for freedom and so little understanding of it.

One can begin to appreciate how abysmally these religious folk misunderstand the nature of freedom by listening to their near-interminable whining about how *their* freedoms are being violated. When one gets to the bottom of these sniveling complaints, one almost always finds that their "freedom" is being "violated" by nonintrusive individuals who are committing private, consensual acts condemned by religious "morality." A good contemporary example of this is the current bleating about gays attempting to "force" the "homosexual agenda" upon poor, god-fearing Christians. When one looks at this even briefly, it becomes immediately obvious that all that gays want are the same very limited legal rights (against employment discrimination, for instance) as everyone else. For fundamentalist Christians, this granting of equal rights is a "violation" of *their* (the fundamentalists') "freedom." Another example is the Christian attitude toward pornography, the existence of which, somehow, "violates" their rights. It's not enough for them to simply ignore it and go about their

own business. No. They want to outlaw pornography and throw its producers (and sometimes its consumers) into prison. Finally, one might mention the unceasing attempts of Christian true believers to use taxpayer dollars to have their creation myths taught as “science” in the public schools. (Of course, the creation myths of other religions are simply silly superstitions and not “science.”)

All of this quite clearly reveals the religious concept of “freedom.” For the religious fanatics, “freedom” consists of the “right” to intrude into the private lives and private activities of others, to use public monies for religious indoctrination, and to force others, either through direct or institutional violence (the law), to live their lives in accord with the dictates of religious “morality.” In other words, “freedom” for religious true believers consists of their “right” to intrude and impose.⁶

Examples of religious “moral” intrusion into our private lives (via the state) abound. To cite two additional examples, the Catholic Church managed to keep birth control devices illegal until well into the twentieth century in many parts of the U.S. (until the 1960s in heavily Catholic Connecticut), and many courageous advocates of reproductive choice were sent to prison as a result. Having lost that battle, the Catholic Church is now attempting to impose its “moral” views on the rest of us through its attempts to outlaw abortion. If it would succeed, those who view freedom as simply the right to vote for one’s rulers would see no contradiction between this intrusion and the assertion that the U.S. is a “free country.”

In fact, many religious folk have an even more restricted concept of freedom than that of its simply being their “right” to choose rulers to impose their “morality” on others. Many (such as the Christian “reconstructionists”⁷) would actually prefer a theocracy or some other form of dictatorship. For these folk, “freedom” consists solely of obeying (and imposing on others) the dictates handed down by their “holy” men and “holy” books. In other words, for these religious believers, the abandonment (voluntary or forced) of self-direction is “freedom.” To put the matter baldly, for them slavery is freedom. A huge painted (and fortunately

6. A quick, handy means of determining who in fact is being oppressed in most situations is to look at who wants to regulate the private conduct of others, and who wants to use the law to throw others in jail.

7. The recently deceased “father of Christian reconstructionism,” the unapologetic racist R.J. Rushdoony, wanted to install a theocracy that would pass laws mandating the death penalty for, among other things, homosexuality, adultery, heresy, blasphemy, and atheism. Rushdoony wanted the victims of these laws to be stoned to death.

oft-defaced) slogan on the side of a former local mosque nicely distills this Orwellian concept: “Freedom is submission to the will of God.”

In sum, it’s fair to say that to the extent that they take their religion seriously—that is, to the extent that they follow the dictates of their sect’s “holy” books and “holy” men—members of patriarchal religions *cannot* be good citizens, even in the common, very restrictive sense of that term.⁸ Through their belief in and support of authoritarian hierarchies, and through their unrelenting attempts to impose their “morality” on the rest of us, they are in fact deadly enemies of individual freedom.

What Voting Delivers

Getting back to the common belief that freedom consists of voting to choose masters who can, and often try to, control every aspect of life in accord (the voters hope) with the voters’ wishes, it’s obvious that the present system doesn’t deliver the promised goods—even for the basically authoritarian individuals who support the voting process. In the first place, there’s no guarantee that elected officials will act in accord with voters’ wishes. In fact, once they’re in office, there are very few checks upon their actions, and they very often act in the arrogant manner befitting what they really are: the masters of those they “serve.”

8. A reasonable common usage definition of “good citizen” might run as follows: someone who follows the law, takes part in the electoral process, and who tries to make the country a better place. Religious zealots *cannot* be “good citizens” under this definition, because they place “God’s law” above all else, and they’ll violate “man-made law” if the two are in conflict. (The murder of abortion providers by “right to life” zealots is a good example of this.)

Devout religious believers also tend to be “bad citizens” in that they have little or no concern for making the country a better place (except, of course, by making it “better” by forcing everyone to follow their “moral” dictates). As one example of this, a great many fundamentalists believe that we’re in the “end times.” Hence, they tend to consider the Earth, which was placed under man’s “dominion,” as transitory and unimportant. Because of this, many fundamentalists have a “rape and ruin” attitude toward the environment. One example of this was the encouragement by Reagan’s fundamentalist interior secretary, James Watt, of the strip mining, overgrazing, and clearcutting of the American West. Another is provided by the idiot fundamentalist currently (2004) infesting the White House, who is inflicting environmental damage that Watt could only have dreamt of (using forest fires as an excuse for mass cutting of mature trees rather than dealing with the undergrowth problem, attempting to gut the clean air and clean water acts, weakening protections for endangered species, ignoring global warming while giving tax breaks to buyers of gas-guzzling SUVs, etc., etc., etc.). Watt, Bush, and all too many other fundamentalists seem to take a perverse, almost sexual pleasure in degrading mother Earth. This is not something that a “good citizen,” under any definition of the term, would be proud of.