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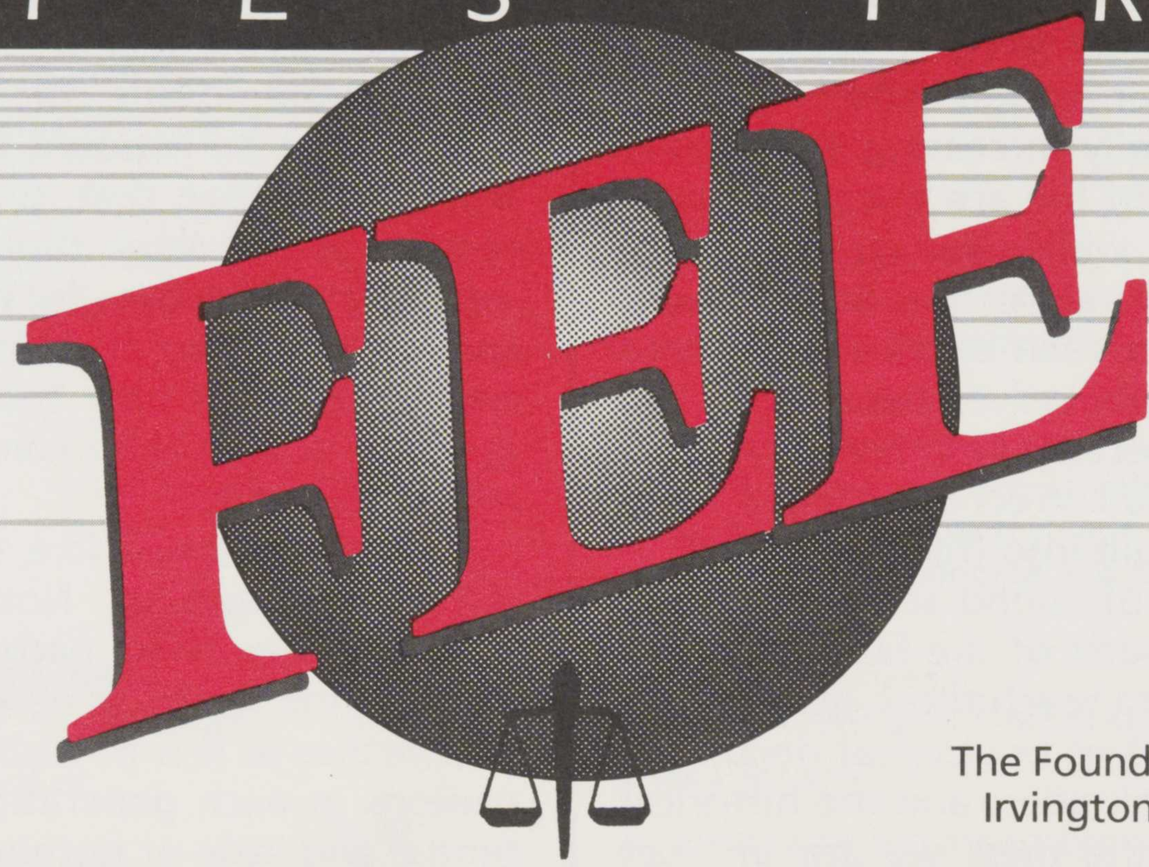

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A Strategy For the War of Ideas

by Sylvester Petro

Editor's note: This issue of Notes from FEE explores the virtues of writing and reading. Since its establishment in 1946, The Foundation for Economic Education has encouraged both pursuits, recognizing that the real reasons for freedom can only be grasped through an understanding of the free market, private property, limited government way of life.

We have called upon Professor Petro, FEE Trustee Emeritus, to reaffirm the importance of the written word in the cause of advancing liberty.

It has taken me a long time fully to absorb the meaning and implications of Ludwig von Mises' frequent exhortation: "write books!" A solid scholarly work on an important subject has a much longer life and greater influence than any living person has. It is in some important ways better than speeches, better than panel discussions, better than articles in popular journals, better than pamphlets, better than thin monographs, better than politicking, better than any other activity measured only in the average human life span. The only thing that comes close to sharing the advantages of a solid scholarly book is a comprehensive and detailed article published in a journal which is covered by one or more of the good periodical indexes.

This is not to say that people should quit writing brief articles, giving speeches, or engaging in politics, if that is their desire. It is only to bring attention to some of the advantages of solid scholarly work in the eternal war of ideas.

Any decent scholarly work will be purchased by all the great university and public libraries. If it is really good, it will find its way into smaller university, public, and private libraries. Its presence will be signalled for ages to come in the library's card catalogue, under author and subject and perhaps, if the cataloguer is good, under all the major topics it treats. Its silent and passive look on the shelves is deceptive, for no decent scholar will write a serious work without at least consulting the library card catalogues available to him. If really serious, he will travel far and wide to find additional works on his subject. When he finds a work which he believes relevant, if he is honest he will bring it to life. It then no longer sits passively on the shelves, doing nothing. It enters his mind. It may have an electrifying impact.

This has often happened to me. I first ran across Henry Hazlitt's writing in a card catalogue. I encountered Mises' *Human Action* by chance in another card catalogue. Life has never been the same for me. Books are not passive.

The country and the world are in much worse shape than necessary. Since mankind is imperfect its condition will always leave something to be desired. But even so, things could be better than they are, despite our inherent limitations and flaws. The correctable aspects of mankind's condition trace to faulty facts or faulty theory or both.

I believe that what the free market movement *must* have now, if it is still to exist after the next dark generation has passed, is an extensive literature of heavyweight, exhaustive, thoroughly documented books