THE LAW

by Frederic Bastiat

Frederic Bastiat (1801-1850) was a French economist, statesman, and author, writing at a time when France was rapidly turning to socialism.

The Law, written in the early months of 1850, remains to this day one of the best explanations of the source and purpose of government. The 1950 translation by Dean Russell is must reading in this troubled period of United States and world history.

We hold from God the gift that includes all others. This gift is life—physical, intellectual, and moral life. But life cannot sustain itself alone. The Creator of life has entrusted us with the responsibility of preserving, developing, and perfecting it. In order that we may accomplish this, he has provided us with a collection of marvelous faculties. And he has put us in the midst of a variety of natural resources. By the application of our faculties to these natural resources, we convert them into products and use them. This process is necessary in order that life may run its appointed course.

Life, faculties, production—in other words, individuality, liberty, property—this is man. And in spite of the cunning of artful political leaders, these three gifts from God precede all human legislation and are superior to it. Life, liberty, and property do not exist because men have made laws. On the contrary, it was the fact that life, liberty, and property existed beforehand that caused men to make laws in the first place.

What, then, is law? It is the collective organization of the individual right to lawful defense.

This common force of government is to do only what individuals have a natural and lawful right to do—to protect persons, liberties, and properties; to maintain the equal rights of each person; and to cause justice to reign over us all.

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