tion in the process. Furthermore, it is futile to seek a single, simple term to describe what an intelligent person believes. The propensity to pigeonhole ourselves under some label not only tends to misinform others but also detours our own thinking processes away from self-enlightenment; we need to think through and clarify what we mean in order to grow in understanding.[3] When we avow, without further explanation, our devotion to private enterprise, we communicate little more to others about our ideology than we would if announcing our social security number.

And, we must ask, why should we profess astonishment when the term "private enterprise" conjures up unfavorable images? Piracy is a private enterprise, and so is robbery, embezzlement, kidnaping, blackmail, head-hunting. Accepting a deep freeze or a mink coat by a bureaucrat in exchange for a government handout or contract is just as private and as enterprising as is a secret price-fixing get-together of corporate officials.

In the instance of the particular label-term here selected for analysis, image distortion originates when "private" is used as opposed to "public" or "government," as if the former were unqualifiedly virtuous. Other terms and explanations are needed to describe the two different organizational arrangements involved.

ALL evils, all virtues – all human actions, in fact – are private in the sense that an individual originates them; and an evil or virtue is neither more nor less private because of its practitioners being in or out of government.

Once we conceive of all action as related to persons and, therefore, responsible, we must look for the significant distinction between different types of private action. What, for instance, distinguishes TVA from an investor-owned electric system, or Canadian National Railways from Canadian Pacific Railways, or the U. S. Post Office from A. T. & T., or a collective farm in Russia from the farm you yourself might own and operate? The distinction is not fully explained by the term "private"; for all actions, collectivized or not, are private. What, then, is the essential difference? What is the characteristic of those private actions which are immoral and unjust and, therefore, should be restrained; and of those private actions which are moral and just and, therefore, should be left free?[4]

HUMAN actions are difficult to categorize in a precise manner, but the distinction sought here is roughly between the compulsory or coercive and the voluntary or nonauthoritarian. Yet this division, by itself, does not complete the task of saying what we mean, for there are certain acts of compulsion that may be desirable in a social sense; for instance, employing the authoritative force to *defend* life, liberty, and the fruits of one's labor. Authority of the defensive brand is needed to put down unwarranted acts of aggression against peaceful persons, to discourage that kind of private action which *takes* life, liberty, and the fruits of one's labor.

Compulsory action by the political authority is action backed by force or the threat of force. Reason as well as history attests to the fact that the political authority is always dangerous, for it can be used as easily for aggressive as for defensive purposes.

Government is by nature compulsory, but as long as persons, organized as government and backed by force, are limited to the defensive function, their work is wholly desirable. But when this same agency of men intervenes to modify the productive or creative affairs of peaceful persons the authority becomes aggressive. The point need not be labored; one example will suffice: should we nationalize opera, as is now proposed, the authority will forcibly *take* the income of all taxpayers to gratify opera goers. This is the simple essence of all socialism and state welfarism.

Thus, it can be seen that all government enterprises beyond defensive functions – TVA, federal urban renewal, federal aid to education, the farm program, federal tourist agencies, "public" golf courses, endlessly on and on – are but human actions, all individual and private, backed by force, which is to say, they are authoritarian enterprises; the coercions are of the aggressive, not the defensive, brand!

Individuals backed by force and organized as government have no place or purpose, are capable of no contribution to peaceful persons in society, except to put down all private, authoritarian actions of the aggressive type. Examples of such private, aggressive action include theft, piracy, contract breaking, misrepresentation, violence, kidnaping – in short, feathering the nest of some with feathers coercively plucked from others.

Many of us when we speak of "private enterprise" in contrast to TVA and the like, have only in mind private actions which rest solely on willing exchange, that is, on nonauthoritarian or voluntary actions. But even these adjectives, more accurately descriptive than "private," will not, by themselves, fully convey what we mean.

SOME readers may look upon this commentary as much ado about nothing. Yet, in these days of scan reading and getting our ideas, if any, on the run, when so many believe they have no time for reflection, contemplation, concentration, and when hordes of us think we have a mission to set the masses straight, there is a temptation to oversimplify, to "lump think." We seek a word or phrase that will serve as an intellectual short cut to saying what we mean. This disastrous tendency is harmful, not helpful, to an emergence of the kind of people among whom the understanding and practice of liberty is possible.

Once we are rid of the self-delusion that we can make over or reform "the ignorant," we may see that the nation's economic, social, political, and moral disarray will not respond one whit to our censure or blandishments; *that the extent to which liberty eludes us is but a measure of intellectual and moral deficiency;* that salvation rests exclusively on the appearance of numerous improving individuals, enough, at least, to compose an attracting vanguard, persons whom others will seek as tutors.

This requires that we find out how better to say what we mean for, in so doing, we plumb our own depths and move toward self-enlightenment. It is impossible to improve explanations of what we mean without, at the same time, expanding our own knowledge and increasing the demand for our services as tutors.

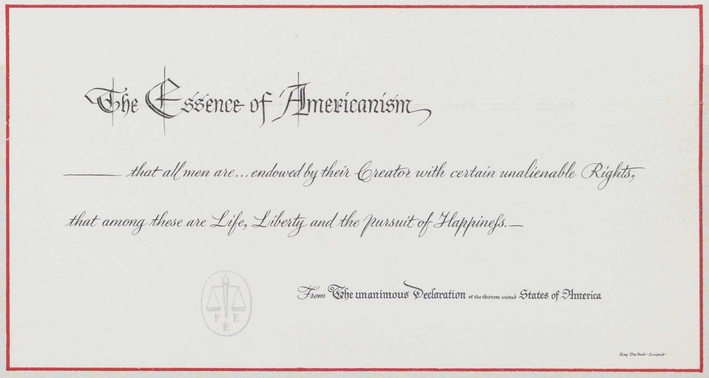
Leonard E. Read

PRESIDENT

[3] For example, what do we mean when we refer to "price control"? Dr. Dean Russell has thought this through to the conclusion that it can have but one meaning: *people control*! Listen to his interesting seminar lecture, "Freedom Follows the Free Market." Obtain LP recording (33⅓ r.p.m.) from FEE. See p. 4.

[4] Bear in mind that we are here concerned only with those private actions which relate to and have a bearing on others, that is, actions with social implications.

. . . Certain Unalienable Rights



In need of something to hang on a wall of my study – a picture or quotation significantly related to FEE's work – I selected a line from the Declaration of Independence and engaged Raymond F. Da Boll, calligrapher, to letter it. The finished product was so pleasing (see reproduction at right) that we struck off extra copies on Strathmore Art Parchment Natural, 23½" x 12". Send $1.00 should you like a copy. Use order form. • For an explanation of why this line is "the essence of Americanism," see a speech of mine by the same title. In pamphlet form, it is yours for the asking. Use order form.