

The Color of Freedom

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Libertarian Lifeline

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CASTRO VALLEY NANNIES FRETTING OVER THE COLOR OF A BUILDING SERVES AS A LESSON TO US ALL

Thanks to residents unhappy with a business that painted its Castro Valley Blvd. office building a bright purple, Alameda County officials are seeking to change Castro Valley's zoning plan to empower themselves to restrict the colors owners may paint their buildings.

In a questionnaire published early in the year in the *Castro Valley Forum*, Mary King sought citizen input. Reporter Mark Dressler wrote that "the county is currently working with a Castro Valley citizens committee to revise a Specific Plan for the Central Business District," to be reviewed by the town's Municipal Advisory Council (MAC), which advises the board of supervisors on issues in the unincorporated town. "The proposed design guidelines regarding building color in the new Plan *do not limit color choice to any particular range, such as earth tones*," Dressler writes (emphasis added). "The guidelines do require, though, that exterior building color be light in tone and compatible with adjacent buildings.

"Discussions with both the citizens committee and among other community members suggest that all changes in exterior building color be subject to the design guidelines, and *require a Site Development Review permit*; fees for review would depend on the complexity of the project." (emphasis added)

Your Editor commented on a form that accompanied this article: "Don't you people have anything better to do than boss other people around? Now you want to order all buildings to be painted boring? *Leave people alone!* It's supposed to be a free country what does that mean if you can tell me what color to paint my property? If you don't like the color, CLOSE YOUR EYES!"

This is the perfect midget example of the essential conflict in our society, one which libertarians have been losing steadily for 200 years. What does freedom mean if it is so readily sacrificed to meddling nannies over such trivial issues? Oh, yes, freedom is fine and well, but we're talking *just letting people paint their buildings any color they want!* They might paint the building next to you some hideous pink!

Freedom, in this view, is what you have left over after everybody has had their say about what you're allowed to do. Freedom is your right to act freely in all those areas that I don't care about.

Rule by emotion

There is a mindset that says that if I feel strongly enough about something, I acquire rights in somebody else's property so I can enforce my feeling. If I don't like the color

The Color of Freedom

you paint your house — if I *really really hate it* — then I gain *as if by the intensity of my emotions* the right to restrain your paint choices.

People! If we are willing to sell our freedom over *paint color* then there is truly no hope for a free society. One person may be willing to sacrifice you (and his) freedom to save the whales; and you over there may think sexual preference is a moral issue so important that it comes before the right to be left alone; and you in the back there may be ready to draw the line when it comes to letting strangers come into your country or neighborhood without government restriction. But for a paint job? We're willing to hand over our freedom to choose to "citizens committees" filled with color-blind meddlers who want everything painted in earth tones?

Wrong choices too

For God's sake, earth tones is another way of saying brown! Do you really want a *brown town*? Do you want it so badly that you'll toss overboard your freedom and that of your neighbor to get it?

If you won't draw the line on trivial stuff like the color of a piece of private property, where the heck *will* you draw the line? What freedoms are you willing to support — even when your benighted, misguided neighbor *makes the wrong choices*? Can he eat at McDonalds? Or only if it's in the next town? Or if he eats only McLeans? Can he read anything he wants? Or only if it's not porno? Or sexist? Or racist? Or Communist? Or anarchist? Or creationist? Or evolutionist? Can he watch things you don't like on TV.? He can? That's very generous of you. *But* what if TV teaches him attitudes that create social problems? *Are we just going to let people watch an)thing they want? Eat and drink anything they want? Wear stretch lycra without a license? Neglect to have religious beliefs? Buy Japanese cars? Vote against tax increases vital to our government?*

Why are we so ready, so eager, to find exceptions to freedom. Why do we so little value liberty? We're happy to allow our neighbor to do things we *approve* of. But when he offends us — get out of the way, liberty, this is more important!

We value liberty so little. The anti-liberals, as Hayek called them, have labored mightily for a hundred years to devalue the concept of liberty. Who today gives it more than lip service?

Liberty requires restraint. "Are you just going to let him..." is the enemy of restraint. If you can identify a bad characteristic of your neighbor, then you earn the right to control his behavior. You aren't allowed to accept the idea that your neighbor may do something you dislike — or disagree with — or that has bad consequences for himself. And if it arguably has bad consequences for *other* people — well, then, you're home free. In their name (with or without their assent) you can control your neighbor's behavior.

Sauce for goose, gander

Of course, so can he. If you can use any excuse convenient to your purpose to control your neighbor — he can likewise use any excuse to control yours. But that's not a problem, is it? Because almost nobody thinks the liberty-destroying rules will apply to *themselves*. Those who want to take Mark Twain out of the library don't want to read it themselves anyway, so *they* aren't making any sacrifice. They want to raise taxes *for people richer than themselves*. The politicians want to make rules *for everybody else* — they exempt themselves. You want to restrict music that's too loud

for you, books that you don't want to read anyway, travel to places you'd never go. And immigration after your ancestors are safely here.

Politicians lure you into thinking this is a rational way to run a society. But it's not, is it?

They went over and over this ground in the 18th century. They finally realized a fundamental truth, one that informs the libertarian's view of the world and is fatally overlooked by almost everyone else. The government must be restricted in its scope, lest it fall into the wrong hands — lest some of your *bad neighbors* — like me! — get their hands on the levers of power. Before you urge new laws, try to imagine if the *worst people you know* were enforcing those laws. What damage could they do? Compare this to the damage not having that law would do. Carefully consider the tradeoffs — bearing in mind that it's almost impossible to take back from the government freedoms given over to it.

Reader, please stop the erosion of our freedoms in these, the simple things. Stop this petty tyranny in our own back yards. Stop the presumptuous meddlers!