

# FEE at 60: Self-Improvement and First Principles

BY RICHARD M. EBELING



March 7 marks the 60th anniversary of the establishment of the Foundation for Economic Education (FEE) by the late Leonard E. Read, with the assistance of a handful of businessmen, economists, and journalists who were all dedicated to the ideas of individual liberty and the free market. From its beginning FEE has been more than what nowadays is called a policy-oriented think tank. Its work is based on the understanding that right thinking on policy issues is impossible unless people have a clear appreciation of the principles of freedom, private property, free enterprise, the rule of law, and constitutionally limited government.

Without these principles any discussion about public policy is like a ship adrift without a means of navigation. As a result, FEE's work on behalf of liberty always tries to analyze contemporary political and economic debates in the context of first principles. This can perhaps best be understood by briefly looking back at how FEE came into existence.

Leonard Read (1898–1983) was a Michigander who moved to the west coast in the mid-1920s and soon landed a job with the Western Division of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce. After the election of Franklin Roosevelt in 1932 and the start of the New Deal, William C. Mullendore, president of Southern California Edison Company, declared that he disapproved of FDR's policies and the attempt by the U.S. Chamber of Commerce to foster government-business partnerships as a means to end the Great Depression.

Read went to see Mullendore to persuade him to get on board with New Deal policies. After making his case for about half an hour, Read spent the next hour listening to Mullendore persuasively explain the virtues of

freedom and the free market, and the dangers from paternalistic government. By the time Mullendore was finished, Read had experienced an intellectual transformation. As he explained it years later, "That was the moment of my liberation; that talk of his back in 1933 turned me on" to the importance and power of liberty for human betterment.

Read began a process of self-education and self-improvement to master the case for liberty and the nature of the threat from all forms of collectivism. In 1941, when he was then the managing director of the

Los Angeles Chamber, Read met Thomas Nixon Carver, a retired Harvard University professor of economics and one of the outstanding American defenders of economic freedom in the first half of the twentieth century. Carver said to him, "Mr. Read, you sound just like Frédéric Bastiat," the nineteenth-century French classical liberal. Read asked Carver to spell this Frenchman's name, and soon devoured Bastiat's works.

Bastiat clarified for Read the crucial idea of the proper role of government and the distinction between legal and illegal plunder. If our individual rights to life, liberty, and property do not come from government, but belong to us by our very nature as human beings (and, as both Bastiat and Read believed, as a blessing from God), then neither private individuals nor political authorities have the moral right to plunder any of us through violence or fraud. If government goes beyond securing liberty and instead violates it through regulation, redistribution, and planning, then citizens are victims of legal plunder.

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York to head a free-enterprise educational project for the National Industrial Conference Board. But differences over the content of this project led him to resign a few months later. Soon afterward Read was asked by B.F. Goodrich Company chairman David Goodrich how he would design an educational project. After working all night, Read returned to Goodrich's office with what became the prospectus for FEE. Goodrich read it and asked, "When can we start?"

On March 7, 1946, at a meeting in the Goodrich Manhattan offices, FEE was established. The founding board included Read as president; Henry Hazlitt, America's foremost free-market journalist, as vice president; and Goodrich as board chairman, along with Fred Fairchild and Leo Wolman, respectively professors of economics at Yale University and Columbia University; Claude Robinson of Opinion Research Institute; Donaldson Brown, vice president of General Motors; E.P. Halliburton, president of the Halliburton Corp.; Charles White, president Republic Steel Corp.; H. W. Luhnnow, president of the William Volker Co.; and Mullendore.

In the summer of 1946, Read set up FEE's headquarters at its present location in a three-story nineteenth-century mansion on a seven-acre property in Irvington-on-Hudson, about 20 miles north of New York City. Read soon had a growing staff of able advocates of liberty working with him at the Foundation. In the early 1950s the free-market journalist John Chamberlain described Leonard Read as "a curious mixture of American go-getter, Tolstoyan Christian, Herbert Spencer libertarian and dedicated medieval monk. Mr. Read holds to the Emersonian belief that a good mouse trap advertises itself by its own goodness." As a result of FEE's good work, friends of freedom were beating a path to his door.

Leonard Read's philosophy of advancing freedom is grounded in the idea that changing the world begins with changing ourselves. In June 1974, when I was in my 20s, I attended a FEE summer seminar. It was a wondrous experience, with outstanding lectures and fascinating informal discussions. But I really only remember one lecture from that week, delivered by Leonard

Read. At one point in his talk he asked that the lights be turned off in the classroom. In the darkness he slowly turned up the light of an electric candle, asking us to notice how all eyes were drawn to it, however dim. As the candle brightened he pointed out that more and more of the darkness was pushed away, enabling us to see the room more clearly.

### The Light of Liberty

If each of us learned more about liberty, we would become ever brighter lights in the surrounding collectivist darkness. Our individually growing enlightenment through self-education and self-improvement would slowly but surely draw others to us who might also learn the importance of freedom. Through this process more and more human lights of freedom would sparkle in the dark until finally there would be enough of us to guide the way for others so that liberty would once again triumph.

Central to Read's philosophy and FEE's mission is this commitment to first principles as the Archimedean point from which the logic of liberty flows. As Read explained in his book *Anything That's Peaceful* (1964): "I mean let anyone do anything that he pleases that's peaceful and creative; let there be no organized restraint against anything but fraud, violence, misrepresentation, predation; let anyone deliver the mail, or educate, or preach his religion or whatever, so long as it's peaceful. Limit society's agency of organized force—government—to juridical and policing functions. . . . Let the government do this, and leave all else to the free, unfettered market!"

At FEE we work to show the harm government does when it goes beyond this task and to suggest the innovative ways free men can solve the social problems that are exploited to rationalize government control.

FEE's role for six decades, in other words, has been to present the vision of and the arguments for the truly free society. And with your help it will remain our dedicated task to do so in the years ahead so we may finally bring about a world of liberty and prosperity for all.

