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Frontiersman

Facing the truth, however great the cost.

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Rights Galore

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There are many things to which people refer as rights. The failure of people to recognize that most of those things are not rights has caused a lot of confusion. It would help if there were different names for each of the different kinds of things that are called rights, but that are not rights. Maybe someday some genius will provide such names. For now, I'll do what everybody else does and refer to them as rights, but with qualifiers. The only things that I'll call rights, without a qualifier, are the things that are actually rights. When I use the word *rights* without a qualifier, that's what I mean.

The failure of people to recognize that many of the things that are called rights are not actually rights is caused, at least in part, by the lack of a good definition. More than 20 years ago, I developed just such a definition. My experience since then suggests that, in spite of my definition, people will continue to cling to their own notions of the things that they regard as rights and completely ignore my definition. So, before I present my definition again, I'll address some of the notions that masquerade as rights in the minds of people who don't know any better. None of those notions actually satisfies my definition. That alone disqualifies them as rights.

Human Rights — The conviction that every person ought to be able to do or to have certain things just because he's human is a noble idea in theory. At some time in the past, it might even have been a good idea in practice. Nowadays, it suffers from the consequences of false assumptions. Foremost among such assumptions is the belief that if somebody needs a particular thing, then he automatically deserves it. Then, since he deserves the thing, it must necessarily be a human right. Finally, since the thing is a human right, some activist necessarily has the authority to make sure that the per-

son who deserves it actually gets it. Using such false assumptions, activists of every stripe have transformed what might have been a good idea into a tool of repression.

The problem is that, without a good definition, the idea of human rights is endlessly mutable. That makes it a useful tool for activists. Each group of activists insists on some specific remedy for its own version of human rights violations. Not surprisingly, such remedies usually require some kind of intervention. The intervention, of course, escalates to the threat or the use of deadly force. Thus, perceived human rights violations provide excuses for the repression and control of any group of people who are deemed to be guilty of human rights violations. Depending on the issue, the deadly force will be exerted by groups of armed thugs ranging from local sheriff's departments all the way up to the United Nations. Compliance or punishment are the only options that the activists will allow. Thus, beginning with a professed interest in human rights, the activists have created a system of surveillance, intrusion, and enforcement that potentially reaches into every nook and cranny of every town and hamlet in the entire world. It's a good example of evil deeds done in the name of an otherwise worthy cause.

Some so-called human rights might actually be rights. Even when that isn't true, some good might still have been done in the name of human rights. In spite of any such good results that might have occurred, I believe that the idea is a net loss. In most cases, it serves only to provide the various activists with a tool of repression whereby they can impose their beliefs on other people. Whatever the case, the idea of human rights doesn't have much to do with actual rights.

Natural Rights — As with the idea of human rights, the idea of natural rights isn't well defined. It's the notion that people ought to be able to do certain things because, presumably, they do those things naturally. If the idea of natural rights is going to be based on the idea of natural behavior, then the idea must deal with behavior such as occurs or might occur →

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in nature, behavior that comes naturally to people. It's natural for men to have sexual escapades but if a man claims a natural right to have an affair with the luscious babe over at the gym, then his wife will probably profess a different view of natural rights. Thus does the lack of a good definition cause confusion.

If natural behavior is going to be regarded as a source of rights then, among other things, it's important that we don't confuse natural behavior with normal behavior. Normal behavior is whatever is expected of a person within any particular society. That varies a lot from one society to the next. On the other hand, natural behavior is what somebody will do when he's left to his own devices. That tends to be more nearly universal among humans, regardless of social mores. It's natural, but not necessarily normal, for people to take things that aren't theirs, for men to be womanizers, and for women to be pregnant by the time they're 14 years old. Some people might want to claim some such natural behavior as rights. Others might want to eliminate such natural behavior from the genome. Whatever the case, just because a thing is natural behavior, that doesn't necessarily mean that the thing is also a right. In general, natural rights is a silly idea.

God Given Rights — Religious people in every different group claim to possess the only true knowledge. Each group of people will declare a different set of God given rights. Worse yet, the belief that the God given rights came from God creates within each group the feeling of infallibility. Since the people in each group perceive their own ideas as being God given, and all other ideas as being false, they all feel justified in imposing their ideas on everyone else. The idea of God given rights promotes the idea of God given behavior which becomes God given commandments for everyone else. As with the idea of human rights, that creates a mandate for interference in the affairs of other people. The result isn't rights. The result is conflict, arrogance, hypocrisy, intolerance, jihads, holy wars, inquisitions, persecutions, pogroms, crusades, repression, and theocracies.

By pure coincidence, a few so-called God given rights might actually be rights. In most cases, God given rights only promote a perception of infallibility, and evangelism. Before you know it, they're trying to put up the Ten Commandments in all of the court houses.

Civil Rights — Civil rights are not rights. They're privileges. They're created, granted, regulated, and removed by governments. They exist under the jurisdictions of legislatures and courts. Actual rights and civil rights are mutually exclusive. Civil rights is a silly notion.

Specialized Rights — There's a long and ever-growing list of specialized rights. Among them are such notions as women's rights, children's rights, homosexual's rights, minority's rights, handicapped people's rights, commuter lane user's rights, old people's rights, fat people's rights, prisoner's rights, patient's rights, shopper's rights, consumer's rights, victim's rights, snowmobiler's rights, hunter's rights, etc., ad nauseam. Such ideas are specific examples of the general idea of civil rights. They're not rights. They're privileges. They're created, granted, regulated, and removed by governments. They're all silly ideas.

Equal Rights — Equal rights isn't a category of so-called rights but I can't resist mentioning the idea because of the amusing impact on it of the various specialized rights. Under the idea of specialized rights, a man can have certain specialized rights if he's fat. A different man can have different specialized rights if he's driving in a commuter lane. A fat man who's also driving in a commuter lane can have both sets of specialized rights. Make your own examples. Whatever the case, a man doesn't have prisoner's rights unless he's a prisoner. He doesn't have shopper's rights unless he's shopping. Whatever example you use, people don't have the specialized rights unless they're in the proper category. That pretty much puts the big kibosh on the whole idea of equal rights. I get a big chuckle out of the way that the activists defeat each other. Equal rights is a silly notion anyway. Any form of equality is an unnatural condition. If it exists at all, then it exists only through rigid and ruthless enforcement. In that case, the so-called equal rights become equal privileges. The enforcer becomes the master. The people who claimed the equal rights become controlled. Go figure.

Right and Proper — People need to understand the distinction between rights and those things that are right and proper. There are many things that we hope will be true, that we hope will happen, that we believe to be right and proper. However, what is right and proper hasn't been well defined. It's a matter of →

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opinion. We can hope that rights will promote our favorite notions of what's right and proper, at least some of the time, but that isn't a requirement for a thing to be a right. People cannot declare rights merely according to their opinions of what's right and proper and rights are not defined by consequences.

Rights — I've observed that, when I ask people for a definition of rights, they give me a list of the things, or of the kinds of things, that they believe to be rights. A list isn't a definition. It's a list. It's a sad commentary on the mentalities of people that they can't even tell the difference between a definition and a list. Worse yet, each individual has a different list. With almost seven billion people on the planet, we can't have rights that are dictated by seven billion different lists. We need a definition of rights that is concise, general, and unambiguous. For more than 20 years, I've been proposing just such a definition.

A right is something that is within your ability, for which you don't need permission, and that is generally or customarily approved or at least tolerated.

The definition is concise, general, and unambiguous. It provides three distinct requirements that a thing must satisfy if the thing is to be regarded as a right. The three requirements are necessary and sufficient. If a thing satisfies each of the three requirements, then the thing is a right. If a thing fails to satisfy even one of the requirements, then the thing isn't a right.

Requirement One: Ability — If something isn't within a man's ability, whether he needs the thing or not, then the thing isn't a right. That's a tough position to take but the alternative is worse. Just because a man needs medical treatment, for example, doesn't mean that he has a right to have it. He has a right to seek it but that isn't the same thing as having a right to have it. If need alone can define a right then anybody can declare a right simply by professing a need. Then, the person who professed the need unilaterally creates an obligation for somebody else to satisfy it for him. Otherwise, his self-declared rights are being violated. If that's the case, then I have a right to a limousine and a chauffeur and I expect everybody who's reading this to get busy and provide it for me. Silly, isn't it? Needing some-

thing isn't the same thing as having a right to it. If a thing isn't within a man's ability then the thing isn't among his rights.

Requirement 2: Permission — A thing can be either a right or a privilege, but not both. If a man must obtain permission before he can do something, then the thing isn't a right. It's a privilege. If a thing is a privilege then a man can exercise it only with the consent of, and under the supervision of, whatever party has jurisdiction over that privilege. He can be punished for any violation of any requirement associated with the privilege. If a thing is a right, then a man can do it or not, without asking. Most of the things that people call rights today are actually privileges. It appears that people are too stupid to tell the difference.

Requirement 3: Consensus — Consider murder. It's within a man's ability and he can do it without first getting permission. That satisfies the first two requirements. The third requirement is what keeps murder, and any other such behavior, from being a right. That is, just because a man has the ability to do something, and can do it without getting permission, doesn't necessarily make the thing a right. In order to be a right the thing must also be generally or customarily approved or at least tolerated.

Definition — Unlike the dictionary definitions, my definition of rights doesn't do stupid things like defining rights in terms of privileges or in terms of all of those other poorly defined things. It isn't devious, circuitous, deceptive, or confusing. Read the definition in a dictionary and you'll see what I mean. My definition of rights provides an objective test, independent of anybody's preconceived notions of what's right and proper. It isn't dictated by some special interest agenda. It doesn't follow from some string of false assumptions. Test something against my definition. If the thing satisfies the definition, then the thing is a right. If it doesn't satisfy the definition, then it isn't a right. Many people might not like the results because my definition will exclude their favorite silly notions from the category of rights. However, the definition is concise, general, and unambiguous. It's the only such definition that's presently available. It can be used to test any behavior. Until something better comes along, it's the best and only definition that we have. ¶

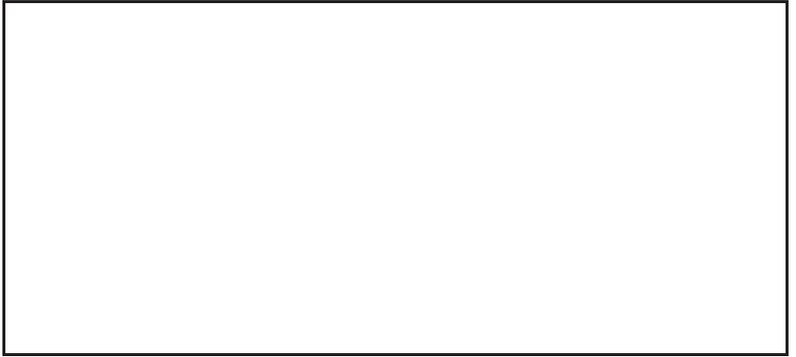
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Nation in Distress

The only difference between a tax man and a taxidermist is that the taxidermist leaves the skin. —Mark Twain



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Court Quotes

From *Humor in the Court* and *More Humor in the Court*, by Mary Louise Gilman, editor of the *National Shorthand Reporter*. Forwarded by Don G.

Q: She had three children, right?

A: Yes.

Q: How many were boys?

A: None.

Q: Were there any girls? ∞

Tough Language

Original Source Unknown. Forwarded by Don G.

Since there's no time like the present, he thought that it was time to present the present.

I didn't object to the object being moved. ∞

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Funny Signs

Original Source Unknown. Forwarded by Don G.

- Outside of a muffler shop:
No appointment necessary. We hear you coming.
- In a veterinarian's waiting room:
Be back in five minutes. Sit! Stay!
- At the Electric Company:
We will be delighted if you send in your payment. If you don't send it in, then you will be. ∞

Kids Are Quick

Original Source Unknown. Forwarded by Sir Donald the Elusive.

Teacher: Donald, what is the chemical formula for water?

Donald: H I J K L M N O.

Teacher: What are you talking about?

Donald: Yesterday you said it's H to O. ∞

Submissions — I solicit letters, articles, and cartoons for the newsletter, but I don't pay for them. Short items are more likely to be printed. I suggest that letters and articles be shorter than 500 words but that's flexible depending on space available and the content of the piece.

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—Sam Aurelius Milam III, editor

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