

PREFACE

2016 was yet another year of startling changes around the globe. Three of the most notable political developments during the year—the United Kingdom’s “Brexit,” America’s election of Donald Trump as President, and the passing of Cuban dictator Fidel Castro—have powerfully reminded us that freedom matters, and we must act to guard and nurture it.

The British exit from the European Union, a supranational entity, has been a long time coming. To a growing number of Brits, the EU has become an overregulated and undemocratic institution. In a historic referendum, by a margin of a million votes, the British people chose to leave the EU. Brexit embodies the very principles and ideals of conservatism: self-determination, limited government, democratic accountability, and economic liberty.

In my own country, the people have spoken too and have rejected failed liberal policies. For too long, the policy agenda in Washington has been defined by well-connected special interests that have severely undercut economic freedom for ordinary hardworking Americans. Beyond the walls of the backrooms where deep-pocketed elites secure favors from their friends in government, almost no one in Washington had seemed to be listening to the American people. The election of Donald Trump has clearly disrupted that deplorable status quo.

In Cuba, the death of brutal tyrant Fidel Castro marked the long-awaited end of a dark era for countless Cubans. Or perhaps it is just the beginning of the end, as the same repressive government that he created, with its

hostility toward freedom, remains strong. The tragedy that Castro’s Communist dictatorship has inflicted on the Cuban people for nearly six decades is beyond description. The death of Fidel opens an opportunity for change if the Cuban people can seize it.

As echoed in these three notable events of 2016, we know from history that the human spirit thrives on fairness, opportunity, and liberty. Yet there are those who persist in attacking freedom in the name of collectivism, solidarity, and social justice. These false idols of a socialist nirvana may have emotional appeal for some, but the real-life results when they become the touchstones of government policy are all too predictable: economic stagnation, poverty, deprivation, and oppression. If we are going to continue to safeguard societies from errors that have brought nothing but misery throughout history, we must win the battle of ideas. The fight for freedom is a never-ending struggle, but people will not fight for freedom unless they understand it, value it, and believe it is at risk.

We free-market conservatives cannot afford complacency; we must tend the flames of liberty, side by side with our allies, new and old, around the globe.

The 2017 *Index of Economic Freedom*, our 23rd edition, provides ample evidence of the dynamic gains that flow from greater economic freedom, both for individuals and for societies. It is gratifying to see overall global progress in advancing economic freedom reflected in rising scores in dozens of countries. The lesson is clear: The human spirit is the real well-spring of economic prosperity. That spirit is

at its most inspired when it is unleashed from the chains in which it has been bound.

The imperative to advance economic freedom and thereby revitalize vibrant entrepreneurial growth is stronger than ever. It should be noted that free-market capitalism built on the principles of economic freedom does not just conserve. In many cases, it overturns and transforms. It pushes out the old to make way for the new so that real and true progress can take place. It leads to innovation in all realms: better jobs, better goods and services, and better societies.

A recurring theme in human history has been resilience and revival. The country profiles presented in the 2017 *Index* provide many such examples of countries that have accelerated their economic and social progress. Their successes can be emulated by others. Indeed, they are a sure guide for ensuing greater prosperity—but only a guide. What truly will matter are the creative solutions to pressing world problems that are certain to flow from individuals who are, in the words of the late Milton and Rose Friedman, “free to choose.”

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