

FreeDumb

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The collective American psyche is composed of numerous qualities. One of those qualities that is particularly strong — I would say “extreme,” but the proponents and devotees of this quality would disagree; they would call it “essential” — is the willful insistence on personal freedom that is complete, total, and absolute in expression. This is a cherished Libertarian talking point, but it extends far beyond that ideology. It comprises a fundamental underpinning of the entire rightward half of the political/cultural spectrum of ideals, opinions, and beliefs.

This notion of personal freedom has been a staple fantasy within the American character since the Revolution that founded the nation. Consider the famous “Gadsden flag,” created in 1775 and adopted by the Continental Marines. The flag pictures a coiled rattlesnake on a yellow background, underneath which are written the words, “Don’t Tread on Me.”



Another example is the “Moultrie” or “Liberty flag,” commissioned the same year, that shows a crescent moon against a blue background. The word “LIBERTY” is written either on the Moon or below it. A modified version is still used today as the official state flag of South Carolina.



America has consistently invoked the word freedom as a virtue-signaling device. We speak of “freedom-loving people” and “freedom-loving nations” as a justification for whatever power games the Empire chooses to play in foreign and domestic affairs. Those trite phrases are dragged out mainly to reassure the rubes here at home that we’re still “the good guys,” especially when we’re not, which is all too often.

Sadly, I think a more accurate term for how Americans cling to the idea of freedom, especially now, would be “FreeDumb.” I didn’t coin that term — I read it online — but it struck me as so deeply resonant and poetically true that I can’t resist writing about it.

Below is a short list (admittedly partial) of the “inalienable rights” Americans unconsciously but fervently associate with FreeDumb:

1. The right to be selfish.
2. The right to be insensitive.
3. The right to be stupid.

Basically, FreeDumb means insisting on doing whatever the hell one wants, whenever one wants, and for however long one wants — regardless of and without the slightest consideration for the repercussions and negative effects such actions may have on others.

What separates *freedom* from *FreeDumb*? Freedom is always co-anchored with Responsibility. They go together, naturally and correctly. Those who understand freedom are as careful not to violate the freedom of others as they are insistent on their own. By contrast, FreeDumb has nothing to do with Responsibility — doesn’t acknowledge it, doesn’t care about it, and refuses to even consider it. Those who are stuck like glue on FreeDumb care only about their own freedom and no one else’s.

Gresham’s Law in economics states that “bad money forces out good.” That financial law is about the nominal value versus commodity value of different currencies. Basically, it says that types of money with bogus value will gradually force out of circulation other types of money with more authentic and durable real value. In much the same fashion, FreeDumb forces out freedom. As more and more people embrace the bogus idea of FreeDumb, the understanding of real and authentic freedom diminishes in the population, eventually to the vanishing point.

There may be numerous expressions of FreeDumb, but two types interest me in particular: institutional/governmental and individual. They take very different forms and appear to be somewhat divergent, almost in contradiction.

At the institutional level, FreeDUMB means taking away the freedom of some people to protect the hegemony of the state. War fever in America is probably the best example of that as a recurring condition. Of course, the government doesn't call this "FreeDumb." It uses the more palatable term "Patriotism." Jacked up by jingoistic propaganda that plays to the Us-versus-Them dynamic of so-called National Security, the American government periodically goes crazy scapegoating any groups who might be suspect. Especially during the two World Wars and again after 9/11, institutional FreeDumb reached a point where it made a mockery of freedom. The Palmer raids in 1919, Japanese-American internment camps in 1942, and the Patriot Act in late 2001 were all egregious examples of governmental FreeDumb gone mad. Those weren't the only ones, of course. There were hundreds of others, some almost as bad, but those three stand out in my mind.

On the other side is individual FreeDumb. Individuals who espouse FreeDumb (although, like the government, they don't call it that) believe that anything that limits them in almost any way is authoritarian and wrong. Whatever impinges on their presumed "right" to do whatever the hell they choose must be both fascist and communist, which is curious, since it pulls together totalitarian extremes from both the far right and far left. And they are quick to point an angry finger and loudly condemn anyone who tries to rein them in. Patience, forbearance, and thoughtfulness are not emphatic in these people.

Climate crisis deniers are one category of FreeDumb lovers. Their numbers will likely diminish, however, as climate disruption overtakes us more and more obviously and severely. The other main category of FreeDumb fans right now centers around the Pandemic. About a third of the country doesn't like the policies that have been put in place to fight the COVID-19 scourge. In fairness, many very good reasons exist for questioning the wisdom and effectiveness of the government's approach to the Pandemic. Sadly (but predictably), the FreeDumb people are not very reasonable in their staunch resistance. Too often, they are not reasonable at all.

As has happened periodically throughout American history, we are currently living through (and struggling mightily with) a time where a massive wave of FreeDumb — both institutional and individual — is sweeping across the land. Democrats have coalesced around the institutional form of FreeDumb, urging all of us to conform, unhesitatingly and without criticism, to their plan for dealing with the Pandemic (through vaccines produced by Big Pharma, with all the greed and corruption that inevitably accompany such sweeping policies). Meanwhile, Republicans are now champions of and cheerleaders for individual FreeDumb, urging resistance and non-compliance with anything and everything that requires a collective consensus. Voting, abortion, vaccines and masks, taxing the rich, leaving Afghanistan — you name it, Republicans are against it.

I acknowledge without any hesitation at all that there are indeed fascist and totalitarian elements at work in American society, some of which are immensely powerful and considered (wrongly) by the elites as socially legitimate. And I agree that we must resist them, in whatever ways each of us can. I don't hold out much hope for democracy, though. We haven't had a real or vital democracy for a long, long time. Our chances of reviving democracy or starting over from scratch seem slim indeed. Mass surveillance, draconian financial controls, algorithms, and artificial intelligence are all juggernauts that can't be stopped by reform, only by collapse. And no one knows what the aftermath of collapse will be, since that will depend on how the breakdown takes shape and how people react. The questions become: *Who and what will remain afterwards? And will building a new civilization even be possible?*

But, as much as I'm seriously pessimistic about our collective future, given the "institutional/governmental/corporate FreeDumb" agenda, the "individual FreeDumb" lunacy now unleashed scares me every bit as much. Those people condemn anything that runs counter to their personal egos, and that's just fucking nuts.

Freedom is a worthwhile yardstick for measuring human evolution. "FreeDumb," however, is just more evidence that we have evolved very little, if any.