

Coming to you from the Forge of Freedom studio in the heart of America, a podcast dedicated to preserving freedom and inspiring personal success. Freedom is born and lives through you, the individual, and it dies in the shadows of tyranny. Motivating our listeners to become well-rounded, freedom-minded people with the body of an athlete, the mind of a stoic, and the spirit of a warrior. The tree of liberty lives on through you, the Forge of Freedom.

And now here's your host, Alex Ooley.

Hello everyone and welcome to another edition of the Forge of Freedom podcast. I'm your host, Alex Ooley, and this is episode 25 of the Forge of Freedom. Today we will be discussing a chapter from F.A. Hayek's book, *The Road to Serfdom*, where he discusses the natural tendency for the worst among us to seek positions of power.

F.A. Hayek was born in 1899, died in 1992, and his real name is Friedrich August von Hayek, but he goes by F.A. Hayek. He was an Austrian-British economist and political philosopher who made contributions to economics, political philosophy, psychology, intellectual history, and among other fields. Hayek shared the 1974 Nobel Memorial Prize in Economic Sciences with Gunnar Myrdal for his work on money and economic fluctuation and the interdependence of economic, social, and institutional phenomena. His account of how prices communicate information is widely regarded as an important contribution to economics that led to him receiving the Nobel Prize.

During his teenage years, Hayek fought in World War I, and he later said that his experience, coupled with his desire to help avoid the mistakes that led to war, drew him into economics. He earned a doctoral degree in law in 1921 and political science in 1923 from the University of Vienna. He subsequently lived and worked in Austria, Great Britain, the United States, and Germany, and he became a British citizen in 1938. His academic life was mostly spent at the London School of Economics and later at the University of Chicago and the University of Freiburg. He is widely considered a major contributor to the Austrian School of Economics. In between 1940 and 1943, Hayek wrote *The Road to Serfdom*, and in it, he wrote a chapter about why the worst people tend to rise to power. And that's what we're going to get into today.

In spite of freedom's remarkable global progress in recent years from the collapse of the Soviet Empire and the end of Mao's rule over China to the growth of privatization, there is no sign yet of a shortage of statists with terrible and destructive tendencies. The best explanation of why and how such people get into positions of power is still found in "Why the Worst Get on Top," which is a chapter, chapter 10, in fact, of F.A. Hayek's masterpiece, *The Road to Serfdom*, the book for which he's probably most well known.

When Hayek released his best-known book in 1944, the world was captivated by the notion of socialist central planning. While almost everyone in Europe and America decried the brutality of Nazism, fascism, and communism, public opinion was being shaped and molded by an academic class which held that these excesses of socialism were avoidable exceptions. If only we could make sure that the right people were in charge, these intellectuals argued that the iron fist will dissolve into a velvet glove.

And in chapter 10 of Friedrich Hayek's *Road to Serfdom, Why the Worst Get on Top*, Hayek delves into the perilous nature of planned economies, offering a fresh perspective on the rise of totalitarian leaders to power. Hayek's insights in this chapter go beyond economic concerns as he explores the fundamental essence of power itself. Specifically, he examines how dictators are able to ascend to power and manipulate entire populations into absolute despotism.

What makes Hayek's warnings in this chapter particularly interesting and captivating is that they were written during a time when the world was grappling with the aftermath of World War II. Trying to comprehend the atrocities committed by Hitler and the Third Reich, Hayek's insights were profoundly relevant in that context. And the world was determined to prevent the unleashing of such evil on civilization ever again.

However, as Hayek cautioned, it is not enough to ensure that good individuals are elected to positions of authority. It is crucial to reject totalitarianism in all its forms, economic, political, social, and beyond.

So in this chapter, Hayek gets into three reasons why the worst among us tend to rise to power. He says that history has shown that the most notorious dictators did not rise to power by chance. It wasn't just bad luck. In this chapter, Hayek elucidates why the most despicable individuals consistently managed to acquire political power and, to echo Lord Acton's famous quote, why absolute power always corrupts absolutely.

Hayek explains there are three main reasons why such a numerous and strong group with fairly homogenous views is not likely to be formed by the best, but rather by the worst elements of any society. By our standards, the principles on which such a group would be selected will be almost entirely negative.

Addressing the first reason, Hayek says:

1. In the first instance, it is probably true that, in general, the higher the education and intelligence of individuals become, the more their views and

tastes are differentiated and the less likely they are to agree on a particular hierarchy of values.

2. It is a corollary of this that if we wish to find a high degree of uniformity and similarity of outlook, we have to descend to the regions of lower moral and intellectual standards, where the more primitive and common instincts and tastes prevail.

This observation is especially applicable to pre-Nazi Germany. Following the devastation of the German economy in the aftermath of World War I, economic hardship became the common thread that united all Germans. Despite lacking commonalities in other aspects, this shared experience significantly impacted the daily lives of the German population.

Hayek goes on to explain, it is the lowest common denominator that brings together the largest number of people. After the hyperinflation of the Weimar Republic, the economic struggles became a unifying force. Additionally, the notion of a shared German identity served as the basis for a propaganda campaign that aimed to unite the German people under one cause, the Third Reich.

The second reason Hayek presents is as follows, and he says, here comes in the second negative principle of selection. He will be able to obtain the support of all the docile and gullible, who have no strong convictions of their own, but are prepared to accept a ready-made system of values if it is only drummed into their ears sufficiently loudly and frequently. It will be those whose vague and imperfectly formed ideas are easily swayed and whose passions and emotions are readily aroused who will thus swell the ranks of the totalitarian party.

The German populace, exhausted and ravaged by the consequences of World War I, longed for prosperity and stability. They were willing to accept any means necessary to provide for their basic needs. And Joseph Goebbels, recognizing this sentiment, skillfully manipulated the German people into not only submission, but zealous fanaticism. Propaganda campaigns relied on repetitive slogans and rhetoric that eventually permeated the psyche of the population. The genius of the Third Reich's propaganda lay in its ability to channel the frustrations and the anger of the German people towards a common enemy.

And this leads us to Hayek's third reason for the rise of the worst individuals. He says, the third and perhaps most important negative element of selection enters. It seems to be almost a law of human nature that it is easier for people to agree on a negative program, on the hatred of an enemy, on the envy of those better off, than on any positive task. The contrast between the we and the they, the common fight against those outside the group, seems to be an essential ingredient in any creed which solidly knit together a group for common action. It is consequently always

employed by those who seek not merely support of a policy, but the unreserved allegiance of huge masses.

The German people were angry, weary, and frustrated with their circumstances. Blaming the nations responsible for Germany's reparation payments proved insufficient since the country lacked the means to address the issue. And consequently, the enemy became anyone who differed from the majority. While Hitler's abhorrence for the Jewish population is well known, they were not the sole targets. Anyone without German blood was deemed a threat to the fatherland and was to be eradicated.

Many would argue that they would not have condoned the extermination of entire segments of the population. However, it is crucial to acknowledge that most Germans did not comprehend the extent of the situation at the time. They relinquished their power in their pursuit of change, unknowingly allowing unchecked atrocities to unfold. And as Hayek points out, there is a growing tendency among individuals today to perceive themselves as ethical simply because they have delegated their vices to larger groups. And what he means by that is it's not me that's doing this, it's the government, this larger group that's doing my bidding for me. So it's a deflection of responsibility. And this notion strikes at the heart of why all totalitarian regimes are perilous. By surrendering their power to an authority, individuals remove the checks and balances that prevent abuses of power. In such a situation, any action that can be taken will be taken, and the people through their own actions have permitted this to happen because they prioritized the ends over everything else.

Think about it, today we are constantly pitted against one another by politicians seeking power. We can't let that Democrat get power or that Republican get power. We are pitted against each other based on classes that are constantly being parroted:

- Rich versus poor,
- White versus black,
- Men and women,
- Gay, straight, rich, poor.

We are constantly used as pawns, pitted against each other for the elevation of political power. The Hobbesian war of all against all that Thomas Hobbes envisioned in a society without government is actually perpetrated and cultivated by government and those seeking power. Hayek explains, it is even more the outcome of the fact that in order to achieve their end, collectivists must create power, power over men wielded by other men, of a magnitude never before known, and that their success will depend on the extent to which they achieve such power.

Power and the competitive system is the only system designed to minimize by decentralization the power exercised by man over man. Brutality of epic proportions is seldom a platform on which politicians are elected. If the German people had known what would transpire under the Third Reich, it is doubtful that the majority would have complied, yet it is easy to make such judgments with the benefit of hindsight.

Those who respect others, who leave other people alone and who want to be left alone themselves, apply elsewhere, namely for productive jobs in the private sector. The bigger government gets, the more the worst get on top of it. Even the worst features of the statist reality Hayek showed are not accidental byproducts. The rise of Hitler was not an accidental byproduct. The rise of Stalin, the rise of Mao, likewise, were not accidental byproducts, but phenomena that are part and parcel of statism itself.

He argued, Hayek argued, with great insightfulness that the unscrupulous and uninhibited are likely to be more successful in any society in which government is seen as the answer to most problems. They are precisely the kind of people who elevate power over persuasion, force over cooperation. Government, possessing by definition a legal and political monopoly of the use of force, attracts them just as surely as dung draws flies. Ultimately, it is the apparatus of government that allows them to wreck their havoc on the rest of us. And hardly a day goes by that a half a century after, more than half a century after Hayek wrote, that the media fails to provide new examples of the worst getting on top. Look no further than the likely frontrunners for the president of the United States in 2024. As individuals, how can we ensure that we do not allow history to repeat itself? How can we resist the temptation in the face of economic uncertainty or external threats? The answer lies in constant vigilance.

Beware of politicians who eagerly encourage you to surrender your power, to surrender power by the masses. When confronted with a decision like this, remember the timeless creed associated with Ludwig von Mises, who was an Austrian economist himself and wrote a book, probably most famously his book *Human Action*. He said, "Do not give in to evil, but instead proceed ever more boldly against it."

All right, so there you have it. I will link to Hayek's work in the show notes if you're interested in reading more about it. But essentially, it comes down to this:

- The people who want to control others have a tendency to go into politics, into government, into governance, because that is the role that allows them to control others.

- Whereas the people who do not want to control others, who don't want to tell other people what to do, tend to mind their own business and stay out of politics.

So there's this natural tendency for the worst to come to power. But once again, I'll link to some resources in the show notes, including Hayek's work, as well as a few other articles that might be of interest to you if this was a topic that you find interesting.

With that said, thanks for tuning in. I hope you enjoyed the show. As always, don't forget to like and subscribe if you haven't already. Tomorrow for Monday Gun Day, we will be discussing an update with respect to, as a follow-up, with respect to the ATF final rule on pistol braces. I'll have Mike back on the show to discuss some news that came up this week, actually, since we posted the show last week, with respect to a challenge to the final rule in the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals. So tune in for that on Monday, and then we'll be back again next week as well. Until then, remember, you are the forge of freedom.