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A day for Enterprise

The last thing this country needs is another holiday. Nevertheless, I would like to propose one: Enterprise Day, to be celebrated on the Monday after the first day of spring. Enterprise Day would be a counterpart to Labor Day. Its purpose would be to honor our most endangered, heavily burdened and most fragile resource: the spirit of enterprise.

The system under which Americans live is not very old. Although it may not survive much longer, in its brief passage through the gloom of history it has cast a lovely light. Most of the progress of science, and the vast part of the world's betterment in the conditions of all people, have occurred during the short tenure of this system. A relatively few of the world's citizens discovered a method for unleashing tremendous energies of initiative and imagination. Such energy has always been available. But no society before had learned how to release it.

The word "enterprise" captured the spirit of adventure that characterized pilgrims and pioneers, founding fathers and builders of industry, sponsors of invention, artists and creative thinkers of every sort. The method was simple: Permit individuals to take risks with their own lives, careers and resources. Stand out of their way and let them go directly to the public. Permit them to reap rewards for offering the public the goods and services the public decided, by its own choices, to accept or to reject.

Such an idea was at first deemed both implausible and faintly immoral. Could individuals be trusted? Did not some officer of Reason need to guide their choices? Were not citizens so corrupt that they would choose badly, squander their resources, and be attracted to lowest common denominators? "The public is a beast," some said. "Only philosopher kings can bring about Utopia," others said.

Nonetheless, enterprise took root in a few small parcels of the world's territories. The power and beauty that broke from them were so astonishing that many other nations wished to imitate their achievements. Some did not wish to trust enterprise. Some tried to reach the same goals through servitude. And Planning. Planned servitude.

Enterprise is a resource more precious to the world than oil. For oil, there are substitutes. For enterprise, there is no equivalent form either of energy or of intelligence. The most complex computer is not as sensitive as the free choices of enterprising individuals. Such individuals are an unending source of invention. They are, alas, easily suppressed. Most societies repress them.

We have reached a decisive turn in Western societies. For several decades, statist politicians could claim to provide more goods and services than enterprise alone. There was truth in this claim. But now the cost of government is high, and the productivity of enterprise is falling. Now it is clear that statism clearly means less of everything. Taxes and inflation, by statist action, climb together. Individuals must settle for lower standards of living.

For the first time in a long time, those who oppose the statists — those who nourish enterprise — are in a position to offer ordinary citizens "more." As enterprise goes up, standards of living go up. As statism rises, so do taxes and inflation, bringing standards of living down.

There is now a huge vested interest in statism. One out of every five voters works for the government. It is time to celebrate the idea of enterprise while it still lives. Labor Day has its importance. It is enterprise that invents the projects on which to labor. Enterprise imagines, labor fulfills. Labor Day needs Enterprise Day as autumn requires spring.

And what would truly make the day distinctive is that it should not be celebrated by taking off from work. There is a far better way: It should be celebrated as a day without taxes. On one day a year, sales taxes should not apply. And all earned income from that day's labors should be exempted from income taxes.

This idea, of course, is playful. But a society lives, more than pragmatists think, by celebrations. If we do not celebrate our distinctive social secrets, we may not immediately lose them, but we are certain to undervalue them.