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Want Another 250 Years? Reject Socialism's Hostility to Property Rights

by

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There's no denying that socialism's appeal among Americans is growing, especially among Democrats and the young. The consensus of recent polls confirms this. In Gallup's last major national survey, only 54% of Americans view capitalism positively — the lowest level Gallup has ever recorded, and 39% view socialism positively. Among Democrats, a whopping 66% view socialism positively!

The recent electoral successes of candidates running under the Democratic Socialist of America (DSA) banner, and not only in the much-discussed New York primaries, confirm socialism's increasing popularity. Seattle elected an avowed DSA member as mayor last year, and Washington, D.C., nominated one on June 16 who is a shoo-in to be elected in November.

Now, as we celebrate our country's founding and reflect on the meaning of the Declaration of Independence and our Constitution, I want to focus on a key aspect of the socialist project. Whether through outright seizure of private property for conversion to public use or through imposition of stringent regulatory controls that substantially diminish a property's value, a lack of respect for private property rights remains a cornerstone of the socialist program.

This antipathy towards private property is directly contrary to the reverence for property rights embraced by our Founders, which they made manifest in the Declaration and Constitution.

The Founders' philosophical disposition was influenced more by English philosopher John Locke than any other Enlightenment thinker. In the Second Treatise of his most famous work, *Two Treatises of Government*, published in 1689, Locke defined "property" broadly: "Lives, liberties and estates, which I call by the general name property." And to the point, he declared: "The great and chief end, therefore, of men's uniting into commonwealths, and putting themselves under government, is the preservation of their property."

Anyone familiar with the Declaration of Independence can readily discern the Lockean influence. As Thomas Jefferson put pen to parchment in drafting the Declaration, he had the benefit of the Virginia Declaration of Rights, drafted primarily by George Mason, and adopted by the Virginia Revolutionary Convention on June 12, 1776. The Virginia Declaration stated that all men "have certain inherent rights...namely, the enjoyment of life and liberty, with the means of acquiring and possessing property, and pursuing and obtaining happiness and safety."

Jefferson, likely aiming for a more felicitous and concise phrasing in the Declaration, wrote that, among the inalienable rights with which men are endowed, "are Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness." In rephrasing Locke's and Mason's formulations that explicitly named "property," Jefferson possibly may have wanted to express a broader conception of human happiness than the mere possession of property. But it would be wrong to suggest that he, or any of the Declaration's signers, influenced so greatly by Locke, meant to imply any lessening in the conviction that a chief object of government is the protection of private property.

Indeed, this conviction was made express in the Constitution of 1787, which explicitly secured for authors and inventors the "exclusive Right" to their intellectual property. And in the Bill of Rights, principally drafted by James Madison and ratified in 1791, that declares that no person "shall be deprived of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law; nor shall private property be taken for public use without just compensation."

Respect for private property is also evident in the Bill of Rights provisions prohibiting the quartering of soldiers in any house without the consent of the owner and the prohibition against unreasonable searches and seizures of houses, papers, and personal effects.

In an essay published in the *National Gazette* in 1792 titled "On Property," Madison suggested an expansive definition of property with a Lockean ring: "In its larger and juster meaning, it embraces every thing to which a man may attach a value and have a right; and which leaves to every one else the like advantage." He emphasized that "government is instituted to protect property of every sort; as well that which lies in the various rights of individuals, as that which the term particularly expresses."

New York City Mayor Zohran Mamdani has proclaimed that socialism seeks “to replace the frigidity of rugged individualism with the warmth of collectivism.” Madison’s rejoinder in “On Property” is as relevant now as it was at the nation’s founding: “A man has a property in his opinions and the free communication of them ...In a word, as a man is said to have a right to his property, he may be equally said to have a property in his rights.”

The Founders understood that protection of property rights by the government is essential to the preservation of life and liberty. Freedom and property are inseparable.

Today’s socialists, with their open hostility towards property rights, disparage the principle, embedded in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, that a chief end of government is the protection of private property. During this year celebrating America’s 250th birthday, there must be a renewed effort to prevent them from succeeding.

* Randolph J. May is President of the Free State Foundation, a free market-oriented think tank located in Potomac, Maryland. The views expressed in this *Perspectives* do not necessarily reflect the views of others on the staff of the Free State Foundation or those affiliated with it. *Want Another 250 Years? Reject Socialism’s Hostility to Property Rights* was published in the *Washington Examiner* on July 6, 2026.