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Rights vs. Wishes

by **Walter Williams** (October 27, 2002)

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Summary: We hear so much about "rights" -- a right to this and a right to that. People say they have a right to decent housing, a right to adequate health care, food and a decent job, and more recently, senior citizens have a right to prescription drugs. In a free society, do people have these rights? Let's look at it.

[CapMag.com] We hear so much about "rights" -- a right to this and a right to that. People say they have a right to decent housing, a right to adequate health care, food and a decent job, and more recently, senior citizens have a right to prescription drugs. In a free society, do people have these rights? Let's look at it.

At least in the standard historical usage of the term, a right is something that exists simultaneously among people. A right confers no obligation on another. For example, the right to free speech is something we all possess. My right to free speech imposes no obligation upon another except that of non-interference. Similarly, I have a right to travel freely. That right imposes no obligation upon another except that of non-interference.

Contrast those rights to the supposed right to decent housing or medical care. Those supposed rights do confer obligations upon others. There is no Santa Claus or Tooth Fairy. If you don't have money to pay for decent housing or medical services, and the government gives you a right to those services, where do you think the money comes from?

If you said "From some other American," go to the head of the class. Your right to decent housing and medical care requires that some other American have less of something else, namely diminished rights to his earnings.

Let's apply this bogus concept of rights to free speech and the right to travel freely. If we were to apply it to my right to free speech, my free speech rights would confer financial obligations on others to supply me with an auditorium, microphone and audience. My right to travel freely would require that others provide me with airplane tickets and hotel accommodations. Most Americans, I would imagine, would tell me, "Williams, yes you have rights to free speech and travel rights, but I'm not obligated to pay for them!"

As human beings, we all have certain unalienable rights. Of the rights we possess, we have a right to delegate to government. For example, we all have a right to defend ourselves against predators. Since we possess that right, we can delegate it to government. In other words, we can say to government, "We have the right to defend ourselves, but for a more orderly society, we give you the

authority to defend us."

By contrast, I don't possess the right to take your earnings for any reason. Since I have no such right, I cannot delegate it to government. If I did take your earnings for housing and medical services, it would rightfully be described as an act of theft. When government does it, it's still theft -- the only difference is that it's legalized theft sanctioned by a majority vote.

Decent housing, good medical care and decent jobs are not rights at all, at least not in a free society -- they're wishes. As such, I'd agree with most Americans because I also wish that everyone had decent housing, a high paying job and good medical care.

About the Author: Born in Philadelphia in 1936, Walter E. Williams holds a bachelor's degree in economics from California State University (1965) and a master's degree (1967) and doctorate (1972) in economics from the University of California at Los Angeles.

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