



Texas Institute for Property Rights

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The Ends do not Justify the Means

We are often told, whether implicitly or explicitly, that the ends justify the means. Modern politics is founded on this premise. A goal that many find desirable is announced, and a campaign is launched to pass a law or regulation to achieve that goal.

These laws and regulations compel or prohibit certain actions. They force individuals to act contrary to their own independent judgment. Indeed, that is why laws and regulations are enacted. Left to their own initiative, individuals would not act in a manner necessary to achieve the desired ends. They must be forced to do so. The ends—some allegedly noble goal—supposedly justifies the means—government coercion.

This premise underlies every violation of property rights. For example, zoning is used to “protect neighborhoods” from undesirable land uses, such as factories or loud commercial businesses. So, each parcel of land is assigned a particular use, and if the owner deviates from that use, he is subject to fines. The harm done to an individual—the means—is “justified” by the alleged benefits to the community at large—the ends.

Eminent domain is used to seize private property for “public uses.” It is “justified” on the premise that the harm done to an individual property owner—the means—pales in comparison to the supposed benefits derived by society—the ends.

Environmental regulations are allegedly enacted to prevent or reduce pollution. Individuals and businesses are prohibited from creating or using certain products to protect “the environment.” The harm done to individuals and businesses—the means—is “justified” on the premise that clean air and water, a diverse biosphere, and a nature unsullied by human activity—the ends—are proclaimed to be noble goals.

In each of these examples, as well as countless others, individuals are harmed. Sometimes their life-long dreams and aspirations are destroyed. Sometimes they must abandon intensely personal values. Sometimes they are forced to close their business or endure crippling financial penalties and expenses. Regardless of the form that the harm takes, the ability of individuals to flourish is stifled. When they cannot pursue the values of their choosing—their ends—they cannot live life as they envision it. They cannot flourish, and it is government coercion that stops them from doing so.

When we are told that the ends justify the means, we are really being told that destroying dreams and stifling individual flourishing is acceptable because some higher, allegedly noble goal will be attained. We are being told that the ends desired by some justifies the means by which they will attain their goals. We are being told that the ends of some should be sacrificed for others through government force.

Noble ends do not require ignoble means. If a goal requires the use of force and the sacrifice of individual flourishing, then we must question the nobility of that goal.

Each individual has a moral right to determine his own ends—his own goals, dreams, and values. He has a moral right to take the actions he deems appropriate and necessary to attain them,

so long as he respects the freedom of others to do the same. He must be free to act on his own judgment, and he must respect the freedom of others to act on their judgment. Each individual must be free to choose his own ends, as well as the means for attaining them.

But if we embrace the notion that the ends justify the means, then we will seek to force others—through laws and regulations—to act in the pursuit of the ends we deem proper and appropriate. We will seek to force them to act contrary to their own judgment. We will seek to force them to act in accordance with our judgment. We will seek to impose our ends on others, and then compel them to enact the means.

Individuals make poor decisions. They do it in regard to finances and careers. They do it in regard to romantic partners and friends. They do it in regard to exercise and diet. So? If we want the freedom to live our lives as we choose, we must respect the freedom of others to do the same, even when we disagree with their choices.

Those who claim that the ends justify the means imply that their judgment is better than others. And perhaps it is objectively better. So? The fact that someone's judgment is better than others does not justify forcing that judgment on others. If their judgment is superior, let them prove it through reason and persuasion rather than laws and regulations.

If our ends are truly noble, then we should seek noble means for attaining them. And that requires us to respect the moral right of each individual to live as he deems best. That requires us to respect property rights—the freedom to create, use, keep, trade, and dispose of material values.

We can “protect neighborhoods” while respecting property rights. Deed restrictions are voluntary, contractual agreements wherein property owners restrict their use of land to the mutual benefit of those party to the contract.

Large tracts of land can be assembled without resorting to seizure of eminent domain. Walt Disney did it when he bought the land for Disney World. He did it without resorting to eminent domain and using force to compel anyone to sell against their will.

We can reduce pollution while respecting property rights. An individual who damages another's property, whether intentionally, accidentally, or through negligence, is morally responsible for compensating the owner. This is true whether the damage is caused by a falling tree, an automobile accident, or pollution.

If the ends are indeed noble, then we should seek equally noble means for attaining them. And that requires us to respect and protect property rights. Indeed, protecting property rights should be the primary ends of government. That is a noble ends, and it is the only means by which individuals can flourish.



The Texas Institute for Property Rights provides analysis, training, and resources for legislators, businesses, organizations, and property owners.

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