

themselves from tyranny, is their unwavering support for a strong military capable of wreaking death and destruction on nations anywhere in the world who oppose American interests.

Some of the freedoms they seek to defend are actually self-conferred privileges, such as the right of white males of North European descent to run things. Or the right to use racially or sexually derogatory words without recrimination.

Tea-partiers never imply that freedoms carry responsibilities. If that thought were voiced, it would be met with the assertion that success in an unavoidably competitive world demands strong individuals willing to take risks in order to reap and keep for themselves and their families the rewards they have won in the face of the resistance of their fellows and the natural world. Thus do they close the door on any hope for a peaceful world free from greed and oppression as they deny their share of responsibility for creating a deepening dystopia.

## DECONSTRUCTING THE TEA PARTY DEFINITION OF “FREEDOM.”

Tea-Partier’s conception of “freedom” or “liberty” stems from an understanding of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence (which they tend to lump together as one document) that is colored by their erroneous belief that these documents are founded in the Holy Bible. In fact, the authors of the Constitution came from colonies founded as refuges from persecution by state-sanctioned Christian religious sects.

Tea-Partiers use the words “freedom” and “liberty” as rhetorical buzzwords with little idea of what they mean in the political context of the Constitution. What, if anything, do they mean when they say they want their freedoms back? What freedoms have they lost?

Of the freedoms guaranteed by the Constitution—freedom of religion, speech, the press, assembly, petitioning of the government, freedom from warrant-less search and seizure, freedom from property confiscation, freedom from cruel and unusual punishment, freedom from slavery, freedom to vote—none have been lost to Tea-Partiers. So what are they complaining about?

However, since the Bush over-reaction to 9/11, some *have* lost their freedoms. Muslims and atheists have lost aspects of their religious freedom. They, along with anti-war activists, communists, and others have lost their freedom of speech. The press is denied access to government information. Peace marchers are jailed. Warrant-less wiretaps of suspected terrorists nullify the privacy of anyone the government chooses to snoop on. The police regularly confiscate the property of suspected felons. The government engages in torture. Intimidation and disenfranchisement of voters goes unpunished. Tea Partiers don’t mind, as long as the civil rights lost are not one’s they’re using themselves.

They’ve argued that they’ve lost the freedom to manage their property and run their businesses without government interference. Compounding the indignity, they are outraged to be taxed in order to support a government that seems to care more for the poor and the wilds than it does for the hand that feeds it.

“But,” you might object, “Many Tea-Partiers are working class wage earners.” True. But they typically imagine themselves as eventual business and property owners. Or all their friends either are owners or aspire to be. They come from a culture where business owners and landlords are regarded as the pillars of the community. If they lack the capital or education to actually realize their dream of independent ownership, they are more apt to blame the distant, unresponsive agencies of government for denying them their freedoms than they are the banks that deny them credit or their own inability to manage a business.

They fail to make the obvious distinctions that there are important differences between powers, rights, and freedoms (which are of two kinds: freedom to and freedom from). The Constitution grants government the power to regulate commerce, and eminent domain over land. The rights of business and property holders exist only within these constraints. They are not freedoms. Regulating commerce and land use are necessary for the protection of the general welfare.

Most of the freedoms they complain of losing are not yet lost but are felt to be endangered. The championing of the right of the individual to bear arms for the purpose of self defense has become, with them, the right of unrestricted ability to intimidate one’s fellows. Fearful people seek to inspire fear, or engage in outright aggression, against those they fear whether they are actually threatened or not. Consistent with their belief in the right to bear arms to protect