

Libertarian's Corner: A Tale of Three Barbers

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When Alex, my Greek barber, retired, I tried several others before settling on those on West 180th Street on the corner of Broadway up a bit towards Fort Washington Avenue. Although Spanish-speaking like all the neighborhood's barbers, they were able to understand my instructions and did a really fine job too. Some years passed and they grew increasingly disenchanted with the new owner of the store, who wanted them to pay for their own tools of the trade and wouldn't allow them common decencies. So, what did they do? Sue? No. File a complaint with a city, state, or federal agency? No. In the best American individualist tradition, they quit to go into business for themselves. To this day the owner of that barber shop has not found success in his replacements. But our heroes pooled their money, bought equipment, and a mere month or two later were in business again—as the competition, located on West 180th Street on the corner of Broadway diagonally across from their old place, a bit down towards Wadsworth Avenue.

They did well in that location, and one of the three eventually retired. The barber shop was located in the first chamber within, but through the outer door, one could bypass the barber shop and go behind it. I never knew what went on there as there was neither an exit from the barber shop towards the back nor a window. Well I was eventually to find out when one day, needing a haircut, I came across the store padlocked with a prominent sign: Closed by order of the New York State Supreme Court—Illegal Gambling Site. (In New York, the Supreme Court is the court of first resort for serious cases.) Of course, I had all the libertarian reactions—but of more immediate interest, I still wanted my hair cut! I went next door to the travel agency to inquire as to what happened. There in the waiting room's corner was a barber chair with equipment and supplies and one of the two barbers! This resourceful man had persuaded the travel agency to rent him enough work space to do his job. Meanwhile, I learned, the other barber was working at home on Pinehurst Avenue just north of West 180th Street, with his barber chair, equipment, and supplies.

Sensing a story, I began to ask questions. The barbers had not known what was going on in the back—and did not care—and hoped the store would soon be allowed to reopen. The authorities did allow them to take possession of their property, after all. (Remember, the state, not the feds, shut the place down.) The travel agent told me that business was slow and she was more than happy to have

the barber defray some of her expenses. The area, you see, is one of numerous immigrant neighborhoods from which immigrants return frequently to their native countries; travel agencies flourish, but there is stiff competition between them for the large market.

I continued to use my barbers, going sometimes to one, sometimes to the other. As a libertarian, I felt a special need not to help the state destroy these men's living—and I recalled that when Alex retired and I started looking for a replacement, I got some fairly unwelcome haircuts in the interim! I learned in discussions with them that they remained partners, splitting their expenses and proceeds. The small space was not designed for comfort but the haircuts were still up to par. Unfortunately, their hope to reopen their store was not to be realized, however, as a restraining order was eventually posted on their old place of work.

Undaunted, the two barbers showed their resourcefulness yet again and somehow managed to obtain a store on Broadway between West 180th Street and West 179th Street. The reader can visit them there and attest to the truth of this tale, while having his hair cut.

The qualities these barbers showed in the face of market adversity (the change of owners in their original place and the adverse working conditions) and government obstacles are not just resourcefulness, ingenuity, and determination. They also benefited from their ability to cooperate—none would have been able to open their second store without the other two and neither would have been able to open their third store without the other. I suspect most people would have severed the partnership or acted in a way that would have made maintaining it an insuperable obstacle—and that would have proved their undoing.

These three entrepreneurs and countless others like them across this land are the real, if unsung, heroes of American capitalism. Their stories do not make for captivating biography; they are not the stuff of heroic novels; they are neither titans of industry, nor great innovators, inventors, or investors. But they epitomize the Franklinesque virtues that made America great and they and others like them are the reason why not everything in this fair land is sold in chains and franchises, as marvelous as those bulwarks of capitalism have admittedly proven themselves. They're the sort of entrepreneur who provides much more than labor and capital in a felicitous combination; they give the word "independent" a strong, favorable cast. Ω