

Topic: Liberty Versus Security in a Free Society

Affirmative (arguing liberty should be prioritised):

The motion forces a choice between liberty and security, and I argue that when the two conflict, liberty should win. My case rests on three claims.

First, liberty is the foundational value. Security exists to protect liberty. A society that has security but not liberty has a prison, not a country. The order of importance is built into the definition of what we are trying to protect.

Second, the trade off proposed is not symmetric. Sacrificing some liberty for some security usually produces a small security gain and a large liberty loss. The post 9/11 surveillance regime is the clearest case. We accepted broad surveillance powers in exchange for what was promised as a meaningful security improvement. Twenty years later, we know the security improvement was small, and the liberty loss was permanent.

Third, liberty has a self correcting property that security does not. A free society can identify and fix its own mistakes because criticism is allowed. A secure but unfree society has no mechanism for course correction, because the criticism that would identify the mistake has been silenced. Liberty preserves the conditions under which we can be wrong without being punished, and being wrong without punishment is how societies improve.

For these reasons, liberty wins.

Negative (arguing security should be prioritised):

I do not argue that security beats liberty in every case. I argue that, in the cases the motion contemplates, security comes first because liberty depends on it.

First, liberty without security is not liberty. A citizen who is free in theory but cannot leave their home because of street violence is not free. A worker who is free to take any job but is shot on the way to work is not free. The liberties we care about, freedom of speech, of association, of movement, of property, all assume a baseline of physical safety. When that baseline fails, every other liberty becomes theoretical.

Second, the cases where liberty and security genuinely conflict are smaller than the affirmative claims. Most security measures, police, courts, and contract enforcement, do not reduce liberty in any meaningful sense. They produce the conditions liberty needs. The affirmative has confused a small set of edge cases with the overall relationship.

Third, even in the edge cases, the right answer depends on the threat. A society at peace can prioritise liberty almost without limit. A society at war cannot. The affirmative wants a single rule for all conditions, and no such rule exists. Security comes first when security is what is at risk.

For these reasons, security wins.