

The Case for and against Gambling
In Perspective
1984

It is almost a truism that it is virtually impossible to get through a day without gambling, in one sense of the word. We risk our very lives when we drive on freeways and our health and taste buds when we eat in a restaurant or buy food from a supermarket. We gamble when we commit ourselves to an evening with friends and associates, and we risk our happiness on a grand scale when we marry or choose a roommate.

But this is not the common understanding of what we refer to as gambling. We usually mean a calculated investment of money and time in a game whose odds are mathematically calculable and always, in the long run, in favor of the casino or the administrators of the state lottery. It is true, of course, that individuals can and do win enormous sums of money for very small expenditures. It is equally true that it is impossible to beat the odds consistently.

As a means for governments to obtain revenue, there is much to be said for games of chance as a relatively painless way of separating the citizen from his or her funds. Those who buy lottery tickets do so voluntarily, after all, often lining up for hours for the chance to lose portions of their wages. For many, the fantasies of wealth generated by lotteries provide an anodyne to an otherwise bleak existence, and governments typically use the obtained revenues for programs of social reform and aid to the aged and dispossessed.

On the other hand, state sanctioning of gambling gives an aura of respectability to greed and encourages unrealistic expectations in people who would be better served by programs designed to help them disengage themselves from their seemingly hopeless circumstances. Perhaps the worst feature of government sponsored gambling, however, is that it is in effect, a form of regressive taxation, in that those who can least afford it contribute most heavily to the public coffers.