

COMMENTARY

Right Is Wrong

By *Brink Lindsey*

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By the waning years of the Bush administration, the old “fusionist” alliance between libertarians and social conservatives seemed to be on its last legs. After the inglorious collapse of Social Security reform, the political agenda of the right was more or less free of any contamination by libertarian ideas. The GOP sank into ruling-party decadence marked by borrow-and-spend fiscal incontinence and K Street Project cronyism. The broader conservative movement, meanwhile, expended its energy on gay-bashing, anti-immigrant hysteria, fantasies of World War IV, meddling in the Schiavo family tragedy, and redefining patriotism as enthusiasm for mass surveillance and torture.

Now, however, opposition to Barack Obama and the Democratic Congress has sparked a resurgence of libertarian rhetoric on the right, most prominently in the “Tea Party” protests that have erupted over the past year. “Libertarian sentiment has finally gone mainstream,” wrote Chris Stirewalt, political editor of the conservative *Washington Examiner*, in a column this April. “After two wars, a \$12 trillion debt, a financial crisis and the most politically tone-deaf president in modern history, Americans may have finally given up on big government.”

Such talk gets many libertarians excited. Could a revival of small-government conservatism really be at hand? After the long apostasy of Bush *père et fils*, could the right really be returning to the old-time religion of Goldwater and Reagan? Could the withered fusionist alliance of libertarians and conservatives channel today’s popular disgust with statist excess into revitalized momentum for limited-government reform?

In a word, no. Without a doubt, libertarians should be happy that the Democrats' power grabs have met with such vociferous opposition. Anything that can stop this dash toward dirigisme, or at least slow it down, is a good thing. Seldom has there been a better time to stand athwart history and yell "Stop!" So we should rejoice that at least some conservatives haven't forgotten their signature move.

That, however, is about all the contemporary right is good for. It is capable of checking at least some of the left's excesses, and thank goodness for that. But a clear-eyed look at conservatism as a whole reveals a political movement with no realistic potential for advancing individual freedom. The contemporary right is so deeply under the sway of its most illiberal impulses that they now define what it means to be a conservative.

What are those impulses?

First and foremost, a raving, anti-intellectual populism, as expressed by (among many, many others) Sarah Palin and Glenn Beck. Next, a brutish nationalism, as expressed in anti-immigrant xenophobia (most recently on display in Arizona) and it's-always-1938-somewhere jingoism. And, less obvious now but always lurking in the background, a dogmatic religiosity, as expressed in homophobia, creationism, and extremism on beginning- and end-of-life issues. The combined result is a right-wing identity politics that feeds on the red meat of us versus them, "Real America" versus the liberal-dominated coasts, faith and gut instinct versus pointy-headed elitism.

This noxious stew of reaction and *ressentiment* is the antithesis of libertarianism. The spirit of freedom is cosmopolitan. It is committed to secularism in political discourse, whatever religious views people might hold privately. And it coolly upholds reason against the swirl of interests and passions. History is full of ironies and surprises, but there is no rational basis for expecting an outlook as benighted as the contemporary right's to produce policy results that libertarians can cheer about.

Groupthink and Fever Dreams

Modern conservatism has always had an illiberal dark side. Recall the first great populist spasms of the postwar right — McCarthyism and opposition to desegregation — and recall as well that *National Review* founder William F. Buckley stoutly defended both. Any ideology dedicated to defending traditional ways of doing things is of necessity going to appeal to the reactionary as well as the prudently conservative. And since, going all the way back to Buckley's *God and Man at Yale*, the right's adversary was the nation's liberal intellectual elite, conservatism has always been vulnerable to the populist temptation.

But prior to the rise of the conservative counter-establishment — think tanks, talk radio, websites, and Fox News — the right's dark side was subject to a critical constraint: To be visible at all in the nation's public debate, conservatism was forced to rely on intellectual champions whose sheer brilliance and sophistication caused the liberal gatekeepers in mass media to deem them suitable for polite company. People such as Buckley, George Will, and Milton Friedman thus became the public face of conservative ideology, while the rabble-rousers and conspiracy theorists were consigned to the shadow world of mimeographs, pamphlets, and paperbacks that nobody ever reviewed. The handicap of elite hostility thereby conferred an unintended benefit: It gave conservatism a high-quality intellectual leadership that, to some extent at least, was able to curb the movement's baser instincts.

Now, however, the discipline of having to fight intellectual battles on the opponent's turf is long gone. Conservatism has turned inward, like the dog in the joke, because it can. The result is what *Reason* Contributing Editor Julian Sanchez has called the movement's "epistemic closure." The quality of the right's intellectual leadership — the people who set the agenda, who define what "true" conservatism means at any given time — has consequently suffered a precipitous decline. What counts today isn't engaging the other side with reasoned arguments; it's building a rabid fan base by demonizing the other side and stoking the audience's collective sense of outrage and victimization. And that's a job best performed not by serious thinkers but by hacks and huck-

sters. Rush Limbaugh, Glenn Beck, Sean Hannity, Mark Levin, Joseph Farah, Ann Coulter, Michelle Malkin: they adorn the cathedral of conservatism like so many gargoyles.

Yes, there are still many bright and inquisitive minds on the right, but they are not the movement's stars and they don't call the shots. On the contrary, if they stray too far in challenging the conservative id, they find themselves cast out and castigated as heretics and RINOs (Republicans In Name Only). Bruce Bartlett and David Frum (who are friends of mine) are only two of the more prominent victims of that intolerant groupthink; both were sacked by conservative think tanks shortly after loudly expressing heterodox opinions.

As the worst get on top, they bring out the worst in their loyal followers. Goaded by the conservative message machine's toxic mix of intolerance and self-pity, mass opinion on the right has veered off into feverish self-delusion. Witness the "birther" phenomenon. According to Public Policy Polling, 63 percent of Republicans either believe Obama was born in a foreign country or aren't sure one way or the other. A more recent poll by the same outfit shows that 52 percent of Republicans believe that ACORN stole the 2008 election for Obama with voter fraud, while another 21 percent are undecided. This polling outfit is closely tied to the Democrats, so take the exact numbers with some grains of salt if you wish. But it is beyond doubt that paranoia is rampant in right-wing circles these days.

The return of small-government rhetoric does not signal a break from the right's illiberal commitments. Rather, those same commitments are simply being expressed in a different way to suit the changing times. We're in the midst of a deep slump, and economic issues always come to the fore during tough times. Furthermore, Washington is now under Democratic control. When their own gang was in power, conservatives rallied "us" against a grab bag of "thems," most notably gays, Mexicans, and "Islamofascists" and their liberal "appeasers." Now the us-versus-them game has gotten much simpler. Barack Obama — Harvard-educated, left of center, the son of a foreigner, a suspected Muslim who (according to Palin) "pals around with terrorists" — pulls to-

gether all the hated “thems” in one convenient package. Opposing Obama and his agenda may sound libertarian, but it’s also the perfect outlet for the same old distinctly anti-libertarian mix of populism, nationalism, and dogmatism.

Let’s look in particular at the Tea Party movement, whose sudden rise is what has sparked all the talk of a fusionist revival. In April *The New York Times* published a detailed survey of Tea Party supporters, and the results are telling. First, this movement is definitely a right-wing phenomenon. Of those polled, 73 percent said they are somewhat or very conservative, 54 percent called themselves Republicans (compared to only 5 percent who confessed being Democrats), and 66 percent said they always or usually vote for the GOP candidate. When asked to give their opinions of various public figures, they gave favorable/unfavorable splits of 59/6 for Glenn Beck and 66/12 for Sarah Palin (though a plurality said the latter would not be an effective president). And in the single most depressing result of the whole poll, 57 percent of Tea Party supporters expressed a favorable opinion of the big-government president George W. Bush — as compared to Americans overall, 58 percent of whom gave Bush an *unfavorable* rating.

It should come as no surprise, then, that Tea Partiers hold distinctly unlibertarian views on a wide variety of issues. According to the *Times* poll, 82 percent think illegal immigration is a very serious problem, and supporters of decreasing legal immigration outnumber those who want to liberalize immigration by 42 to 14 percent. Only 16 percent favor gay marriage (compared to 39 percent of the country at large), and 40 percent call for no legal recognition of same-sex unions. Meanwhile, 77 percent support either banning abortions outright or making them more difficult to obtain.

But at least the Tea Partiers are dedicated to reining in government spending, right? After all, it’s the movement’s defining issue. Well, put me down as a skeptic. If you really care about restraining the growth of government, the number one priority has to be restructuring the budget-busting Medicare program. Yet during the health care debate the GOP sank to shameless demagoguery in defending Medicare’s sanctity. The short-term goal was to score points against ObamaCare, but the most likely long-term

effect was to make needed reforms even more difficult to achieve. And how did Tea Partiers, and movement conservatives generally, respond to this irresponsible pandering? They scarcely said boo.

Authoritarian and Unpopular

Notwithstanding the return of libertarian rhetoric, the right today is a fundamentally illiberal and authoritarian movement. It endorses the systematic use of torture. It defends unchecked presidential power over matters of national security. It excuses massive violations of Americans' civil liberties committed in the name of fighting terrorism. It supports bloated military budgets, preventive war, and open-ended, nation-building occupations. It calls for repressive immigration policies. Far from being anti-statist, it glorifies and romanticizes the agencies of government coercion: the police and the military. It opposes abortion rights. It opposes marriage equality. It panders to creationism. It routinely questions the patriotism of its opponents. It traffics in outlandish conspiracy theories. If you're serious about individual freedom and limited government, you cannot stand with this movement.

In any event, conservatism in its current incarnation looks like a political dead end. Its wildly overheated rhetoric, with cries of socialism and dark hints of impending dictatorship, alienates the moderate center of American public opinion even as it thrills the hardcore base. That base, meanwhile, is in long-term demographic decline. White, married, churchgoing, with kids — all those categories associated with a right-of-center orientation have been shrinking as a percent of the population, and all are expected to continue shrinking. In analyzing the impact of demographic change on the 2008 election, the journalist Ron Brownstein looked at six basic groups: whites with college degrees, whites without degrees, African-Americans, Hispanics, Asians, and other minorities. If each of those group's share of the electorate had remained unchanged since 1992, McCain would have beaten Obama by 2 percentage points instead of losing by 7.

At the same time, younger Americans have decisively repudiated the contemporary right's illiberal social values. The Pew Research Center's 2007 survey of Americans aged 18–25, dubbed "Generation Next," is illustrative. Pew's polling reveals that young

adults are dramatically less religious and less nationalist than their elders. Twenty percent say they are not religious, compared to only 11 percent of Americans 26 or older. They favor evolution over creationism by a 63 to 33 margin. Supporters of gay marriage in this age group narrowly outnumber opponents (47 to 46 percent), while among everyone older opponents carry the day by a 64–30 spread. Among young adults, 52 percent say immigrants strengthen our country, while 38 percent say they are a burden; by contrast, Americans 26 and up embrace the anti-immigrant view by a 42–39 margin. In the rising generation, only 29 percent agree that “using overwhelming force is the best way to defeat terrorism,” while 67 percent think that “relying too much on military force leads to hatred and more terrorism.” Among Americans 26 and older, though, hawks beat doves 49 to 41. God-and-country populism may still appeal to a large number of Americans (though certainly not a majority), but its future looks bleak.

Back in the Cold War, when socialism remained a living ideal and totalitarianism was a leading force in world affairs, an anti-socialist alliance between libertarians and social conservatives may have made sense. It doesn't anymore.

Does that mean I think that libertarians should ally with the left instead? No, that's equally unappealing. I do believe that libertarian ideas are better expressed in the *language* of liberalism rather than that of conservatism. But it's clear enough that for now and the foreseeable future, the left is no more viable a home for libertarians than is the right.

The blunt truth is that people with libertarian sympathies are politically homeless. The best thing we can do is face up to that fact and act accordingly. That means taking the libertarian movement in a new direction: attempting to claim the center of American politics. If that move were successful, ideas of a distinctly libertarian cast would define the views of a critical swing constituency that politicians on the left and right would have to compete for.

Make no mistake, though: relocating to the center would make for a very different movement than the one we've got now. The organized libertarian movement began with the goal of offering a radical alternative to conservatism and liberalism. But ever since the main vehicle of that aspiration, the Libertarian Party, fizzled into irrelevance in the 1980s, the movement has tilted heavily to the right. However much individual libertarians like to think they transcend the left-right divide, the actual operating strategy of organized libertarianism has been fusionism.

In particular, a great deal of libertarian talent and energy has gone into building a "free market" movement of organizations that focus more or less exclusively on economic issues. These organizations include fundraising groups such as the Club for Growth, activist outfits such as FreedomWorks and Americans for Prosperity, legal shops such as the Institute for Justice, and state-level think tanks such as the Mackinac Center and the Goldwater Institute. By steering clear of social issues and foreign policy, the free-market movement has shunted aside the questions that divide libertarians from conservatives and instead institutionalized the ground they seem to share.

Expressly libertarian writers have spent much more time engaging conservative audiences than reaching out to liberals. They have written more frequently for right-wing outlets such as *National Review*, *The Washington Times*, and *The Wall Street Journal* than for their counterparts on the left. They have regularly identified with the Goldwater-Reagan current of conservatism, notwithstanding the profound differences between that strain and libertarian thinking on a number of fronts. And they have often couched libertarian arguments in conservative terms, venerating the timeless wisdom of America's founding principles while conveniently ignoring the fact that another set of founding principles included the enslavement of blacks, subjugation of women, and expropriation of Indian lands.

Declaring independence from the right would require big changes. Cooperation with the right on free-market causes would need to be supplemented by an equivalent level of cooperation with the left on personal freedom, civil liberties, and foreign policy issues. Funding for political candidates should be reserved for politicians whose com-

mitment to individual freedom goes beyond economic issues. In the resources they deploy, the causes they support, the language they use, and the politicians they back, libertarians should be making the point that their differences with the right are every bit as important as their differences with the left.

The first step, though, is recognizing the problem. Right now, like it or not, the libertarian movement is a part of the vast right-wing conspiracy — a distinctive and dissident part, to be sure, but a part all the same. As a result, our ideals are being tainted and undermined through guilt by association. It's time for libertarians to break ranks and stand on our own.



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Why the 'Libertarian Moment' Isn't Really Happening

By David Frum

Has the libertarian moment finally arrived? Robert Draper asks that question in the [Sunday New York Times Magazine](#). His answer: Yes! Young voters are leaning libertarian, he says, and a Rand Paul presidential candidacy could energize those voters for the GOP.

Spoiler alert: Draper's wrong, emphatically wrong. Young voters are not libertarian, nor even trending libertarian. Neither, for that matter, are older voters. The "libertarian moment" is not an event in American culture. It's a phase in internal Republican Party factionalism. Libertarianism is not pushing Republicans forward to a more electable future. It's pushing them sideways to the extremist margins.

Every serious study of the political attitudes of voters under 30 has discovered them to be [the most pro-government age group](#) since the cohort that directly experienced the Great Depression. Young voters are more likely than their elders to believe that government should intervene in the economy to create jobs. They support government aid to education and healthcare more than any other age group. Their voting behavior tracks their values: Under-30s massively voted for Barack Obama in 2008 and 2012.

It's demography that explains the shift in ideology.

Nonwhite voters favor government intervention in the economy much more than white voters do. That's true at every age, both over-60 and under-30. But there are many more nonwhites among under-30s than among over-60s, so their preferences exert more sway over the group as a whole.

The claim that young voters are trending libertarian rests on three principal data points:

1. Young voters are more permissive on issues like same-sex marriage and drug legalization than their elders.
2. Young voters are [marginally less supportive](#) of Medicare and Social Security in their present form than are older voters.
3. Young voters are more alienated from institutions than their elders, including the two existing political parties.

But these points don't add up to libertarianism. They don't even present an opening to libertarianism. They reveal (modest) generational self-interest, social liberalism, and political demobilization.

So what's the basis for Draper's story? Draper may not be a data guy, but he's a good reporter, with lively instincts for a story. What he wrote was not true. But it felt true to him. Why?

Libertarianism is not rising in the country, but since 2009 it has exercised increasing influence inside the Republican party.

One measure of the libertarian rise is the waxing fortunes of the Paul dynasty—Ron, the longtime Texas congressman who retired last year, and Rand, his son, a first-term senator from Kentucky. In 1988, Ron Paul ran for president as the nominee of the Libertarian Party, gaining 0.5 percent of the vote. The elder Paul sought the Republican nomination in 2008 and collected only a couple of dozen delegates. In 2012, however, Ron Paul burst into prime time. More than 2 million Republicans cast ballots for him, earning him a fourth-place finish and nearly 200 delegates. Now Rand is preparing to run in 2016. He's generally regarded as a highly plausible candidate, if an unlikely winner.

Ron Paul's 2012 campaign raised nearly \$15 million. The *Wall Street Journal* [estimates](#) that Rand Paul has raised nearly \$8 million in the 2014-2016 cycle, in direct contributions, PAC and SuperPac funds. (Of that, \$5.1 million has already been spent or donated to other candidates.)

In addition to this unprecedented financial support, libertarians have redirected the Republican Party in policy terms. Mitt Romney and Paul Ryan ran in 2012 on the most radical fiscal plan since 1964: Ryan's bold proposal to end the Medicare guarantee for everyone under age 55 and to institute tough budget cuts in unemployment insurance, food stamps, and other income support programs. The party's stance on gun control has become ever more unyielding. Ron Paul's anti-Federal Reserve message was echoed in the last political cycle by almost every presidential candidate, with Texas Governor Rick Perry even lightly proposing to lynch chairman Ben Bernanke.

Maybe most tellingly, the GOP has backed far, far away from the national-security policy of the Bush years. Denunciations of the National Security Agency's surveillance programs have become standard-issue Republican rhetoric. The [tally of likely votes](#) just before President Obama withdrew his request for authority to strike Syria last September showed 170 definite or likely Republican "no" votes in the House of Representatives.

Despite the self-flattering claims of libertarians, the Republicans' post-2009 libertarian turn is not a response to voter demand. The areas where the voting public has moved furthest and fastest in a libertarian direction—gay rights, for example—have been the areas where Republicans have moved slowest and most reluctantly. The areas where the voting public most resists libertarian ideas—such as social benefits—are precisely the areas where the GOP has swung furthest and fastest in a libertarian direction.

Nor is it the strength and truth of libertarian ideas that explains their current vogue within the Republican Party. Libertarians have been most influential inside the GOP precisely where they have been—and continue to be—most blatantly wrong, such as when they predicted that the cheap money policies of the Federal Reserve would incite hyperinflation or that the United States teetered on the precipice of a debt crisis.

Much of the libertarian appeal is probably as simple as the isolationist reaction that tends to overtake

the United States after military conflicts. Libertarians always want to cut the defense budget, and after Iraq and Afghanistan, many orthodox Republicans felt in the mood to agree with them. Yet it's also true that post-Iraq and post-Afghanistan, the Republicans remain the party of assertive nationalism—and the party more comfortable with the use of force. It's telling that prior to running for president, Rand Paul has reinvented his own past views both on Israel and on drone attacks inside Afghanistan. Isolationism alone doesn't explain the rise of libertarianism inside the GOP.

Libertarianism diverges from ordinary conservatism in many ways, but perhaps most fundamentally in this: Whereas ordinary conservatism emphasizes the inefficiency and ineffectiveness of government action, libertarianism presents government as alien and malign. When Rand Paul rose early in 2013 to deliver the longest talking filibuster since Strom Thurmond battled civil rights in 1957, he did so not to oppose some new bureaucracy or tax. No, Paul rose to denounce the supposedly looming danger of lethal drone attacks on ordinary law-abiding Americans. “I will speak today until the President responds and says no, we won't kill Americans in cafes; no, we won't kill you at home in your bed at night; no, we won't drop bombs on restaurants,” he said. Repeatedly, Paul insisted that he was not accusing President Obama of plotting the murder of American citizens. Equally repeatedly, however, he made clear that he considered the danger of presidential murder of people like himself real and imminent.

“There's something called fusion centers, something that are supposed to coordinate between the federal government, the local government to find terrorists,” Paul said at one point. “The one in Missouri a couple years ago came up with a list, and they sent this to every policeman in Missouri. The people on the list might be me. The people on the list from the fusion center in Missouri that you need to be worried about, that policemen should stop, are people that have bumper stickers that might be pro-life, who have bumper stickers that might be for more border security, people who support third-party candidates, people who might be in the Constitution Party.”

The claim that the president might at any moment order death from the skies upon people whose only offense was to paste a pro-life bumper sticker on their car might once have seemed laughable to Republicans. Since 2009, it has become credible. That is the emotional basis of the “libertarian moment.”

Like all political movements, libertarianism binds together many divergent strands. It synthesizes the classical liberalism of the 1860s with the human-potential movement of the 1960s. It joins elegant economic theory to the primitive insistence that only metal can be money. It mingles nostalgia for the vanished American frontier with fantasies drawn from science fiction. It offers three cheers both for thrift, sobriety, and bourgeois self-control and three more for sex, drugs, and rock-and-roll. It invokes the highest ideals of American constitutionalism—and is itself invoked by the most radical critics of the American state and nation, from neo-Confederates to 9/11 Truthers.

For mainstream conservatives, concerned about the growth of government since 2008, libertarianism can sometimes sound like only a slightly more exuberant version of what they already believe. Until recently, however, the differences have mattered more than the similarities, just as American liberals have usually found that their differences with socialists mattered more than the similarities.

Until recently, a mainstream conservative might yearn for lower taxes, lighter regulation, and privatization of government services. But mainstream conservatives also championed effective policing and strong national defense. Mainstream conservatives had made their peace with some forms of social insurance. They had absorbed the Keynesian idea that governments could and should act to counteract recessions and depressions.

Yet since 2008, those differences have blurred. The libertarians interviewed by Robert Draper talk about their movement's exciting, bold ideological vision. Yet the true secret to its post-2008 appeal is just the opposite. Those conservatives who succumb to libertarianism do so in despair, not hope. Instead of competing to govern the state, many now feel that their only hope is defend themselves—with arms if necessary—against an inherently and inevitably hostile and predatory state.

Conservatives who still want to compete, win, and govern must trust that this despair will pass. The “libertarian moment” will last as long as, and no longer than, it takes conservatives to win a presidential election again. Unfortunately, the libertarian moment is itself the most immediate and the most difficult impediment to the political success that will be libertarianism's cure.

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