



Movement on the Rise?

It's about time. We've tried everything else.

By Doug Bandow
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The New York Times wonders if the libertarian moment has arrived.

Maybe, suggested an article in the Sunday magazine.

Supporters of Rand Paul and father Ron think so. Award-winning economist turned left-wing pundit Paul Krugman is not convinced.

Unfortunately, there have been false starts before. Ronald Reagan's election seemed the harbinger of a new freedom wave. His rhetoric was great, but actual accomplishments lagged far behind. Taxes were lower, but when he left office government looked pretty much the same as it did when he was sworn in, only bigger.

So, too, with the 1994 Republican takeover of Congress. As before, there was a tendency to confuse partisanship with philosophy. Admittedly, members of the GOP tend to toss around such phrases as "individual liberty" and "limited government." However, their behavior in office looked little different from that of many Democrats. Like the Reagan Revolution, the Gingrich Revolution also sputtered out.

Since then there's been even less to celebrate in America, at least. George W. Bush was an avid proponent of "compassionate," big-government conservatism. Outlays rose faster during his administration than they had during Bill Clinton's. No one did more to bail out business and enrich corporate America than Bush, the architect of the big-spending response to the 2008 financial crisis.

Barack Obama continued the tradition, promoting corporate welfare, pushing through a massive "stimulus" bill for the bank accounts of federal contractors, and seizing control of what remained private in the health care system. About the only good news is that incipient federal bankruptcy has discouraged Congress from adopting other massive new spending programs.

Over the last half-century, members of both parties took a welfare state that was of modest size despite the excesses of Franklin Delano Roosevelt's New Deal and put it on a fiscally unsustainable basis as part of the misnamed "Great Society." Economist Lawrence Kotlikoff figures government's total unfunded liability at around \$220 trillion. America's annual GDP is just \$17 trillion. How Uncle Sam will ever make good on all its promises is impossible to imagine.

The national government has done no better with international issues. Trillions went for misnamed "foreign aid" that subsidized collectivism and autocracy. Only the recent growth of international markets and sustained pain of domestic failure moved many poor countries to reform. And even so the foreign money continues to flow, only in renamed programs for slightly different purposes.

Moreover, trade liberalization faces determined resistance, and is often blocked by countries that enjoy the greatest benefits of global commerce. Indeed, the Left in wealthy, industrialized nations has discovered how to kill trade agreements with kindness, loading them with environmental and labor regulations in the name of the world's poor, but guaranteed to prevent new jobs from being created for those very same poor.

Even worse has been foreign policy. The ecstasy felt by most people after the collapse of the Berlin Wall—a quarter-century ago—has been forgotten. The defense budget has turned into a new form of foreign aid for America's populous and prosperous allies. The U.S. has been constantly at war, repeatedly proving that the Pentagon is no better at social engineering than is any other government agency. Yet again and again Washington attempts to transcend history, culture, ethnicity, geography, religion, ideology, nationality, and more to fix other societies. It turns out that war is the biggest big government program around.

Americans across the political spectrum agree that something is wrong, that the status quo is no good. But they disagree on the remedy.

However, the answer shouldn't be that hard to discern. The definition of insanity, runs the old adage, is to keep doing the same thing while expecting different results. Today, government attempts to solve problems by doing ever more of whatever it is already doing. Thus, those who support such policies, whether on the left or right, and expect things to improve in the future should head off to see their psychiatrists. For they are exhibiting disturbing symptoms of insanity.

The economy is slowing, people are falling behind economically, freedoms are being lost, and security fears are rising? No problem. Roll out the usual failed nostrums.

More spending on old programs. Lots of spending on new programs. New and more restrictive regulations. Paternalistic crusades. Criminal penalties for violating commercial and environmental rules. Restrictions on civil liberties. Wars in new places and new wars in old places. We know what the impact of these policies will be. All we have to do is look around the world and see what has happened.

It is this reality, not new personalities, organizations, generations, or something else, that is creating a libertarian moment. Statism and collectivism have been tried and found wanting in all of their variants.

The twentieth century killed off communism and fascism as serious alternatives. They resulted in totalitarian death states capable of killing on a mass scale, but little else. Lives were squandered, liberties were extinguished, the human spirit was suppressed, and people were impoverished.

The chief competitor was not laissez-faire capitalism, as some suggested, but highly regulated and monumentally expensive welfare states. They were freer and more prosperous than their geopolitical antagonists—even a little capitalism goes a long way—but the erosion of liberty and prosperity was constant. Perhaps more debilitating was the corrosive impact on the foundational principles of a free society, such as independence, self-reliance, responsibility, accountability, and more. This assault in America continues with, for instance, the federal government recently turning health care into another massive entitlement, highlighted by pervasive regulation and income redistribution.

The obvious, and only, alternative to more government, which has failed so badly, is less government. Why blame individuals and companies for fleeing the tax mess created in Washington? Lower tax rates and rationalize complex tax systems. Why threaten America's future by running budget-busting deficits into the future forever? Cut the wasteful looting and pillaging that is a hallmark of today's transfer society.

Why concoct expensive development and stimulus programs? Kill unnecessary and relax unnecessarily stringent regulations, while making legitimate rules more market-friendly. Why attempt to micro-manage the world with strategies that have failed at home? Model liberty, prosperity, tolerance, and peace for others, allowing individual Americans going abroad to be America's best ambassadors.

Has the libertarian moment arrived? The bankruptcy of statism and collectivism and all their variants is evident. So is the desperate need for liberty-minded solutions.

However, the tyranny of the status quo, as Milton Friedman termed it, remains omnipresent and powerful. Those who benefit from the politics of plunder will not yield voluntarily. As a result, the libertarian moment will not "arrive." It will have to be brought forward, seized by those committed to a better and freer America.

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