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May 20, 2011

The Definitive F. A. Hayek

To the Editor:

In his May 8 review of Friedrich A. Hayek's "Constitution of Liberty," Francis Fukuyama cites a common, ill-conceived, critique: that for Hayek, morality is "more like a useful coordinating device than a categorical imperative." Hayek, like other free-market theorists, developed an ethical system in which only a particular personality or character fits within the market order. In "The Constitution of Liberty," he argues that markets and freedom require responsibility, and that responsibility requires discipline. Society must instill the personal ethics required for market efficiency.

JACOB SEGAL

New York

The writer is an assistant professor of political science at Kingsborough Community College of the City University of New York.

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To the Editor:

I have no general quarrel with Francis Fukuyama's review, but I do take issue with his suggestion that Friedrich A. Hayek's "principled defense of a minimal state" has found "strong political resonance" in America's (so-called) conservative movement.

Although strains of that movement — for example, the Cato Institute — follow Hayek's principle, the overwhelming thrust of conservative politics in America has been anything but an advocacy of a minimal state, and certainly not for the purposes of protecting personal liberties.

Conservatives have consistently favored a powerful, interventionist state. This includes support for, among other things, a constitutional amendment banning "desecration" of the flag; an escalating war on drugs that for decades has been a source of violations of constitutional rights; and restrictions on people's choices of whom to marry and on women's reproductive freedom.

The conservative "minimal state" is invoked to eradicate regulatory limits on rapacious financial manipulations and to lower taxes disproportionately for the very wealthy, while paying for it with brutal cuts to social programs like Medicare and Social Security. But when it comes to reining in

the state to guarantee personal liberty — a central concern of Hayek’s — conservatives have, with notable exceptions, been on the other side.

IRA GLASSER

New York

The writer was executive director of the American Civil Liberties Union from 1978 to 2001.

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To the Editor:

Francis Fukuyama says, offhandedly, that many of Friedrich A. Hayek’s ideas “have become broadly accepted by economists — e.g., that labor unions create a privileged labor sector at the expense of the nonunionized; that rent control reduces the supply of housing; or that agricultural subsidies lower the general welfare and create a bonanza for politicians.” To the contrary, economists have widely differing views on these issues.

While it’s true that unionized employees earn better wages and benefits, the existence of unions has forced employers to raise wages and benefits for nonunionized workers to stave off union drives, thus raising the floor for all workers. Second, studies of rent control in American cities (except those financed by the real estate industry) show that it has no impact on either the level of new housing construction or the level of housing abandonment. Finally, during the Depression, federal agricultural subsidies saved family farms and rural jobs. Today, a vast majority of farm subsidies go to large agribusiness conglomerates that don’t need them, rather than to small family farmers. But food stamps, an indirect subsidy to farmers, clearly improve the general welfare.

Hayek’s ideas may be making a comeback, as Fukuyama suggests, but it’s not because his economic ideas have been validated by empirical research, but because they’ve been promoted by the likes of Glenn Beck to justify a conservative ideological and political agenda.

PETER DREIER

Los Angeles

The writer is a professor of politics at Occidental College.