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Libertarianism: The idea that's never wrong (until you actually try it)

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Dan
Calabrese

Libertarianism always sounds great on the pages of *Reason* magazine, or in position papers put out by the Cato Institute. Or in dorm rooms filled with 19-year-old pot-smokers who just want the freedom to live their lives without interference from the fuzz, man.

Privatize everything and get government out of our lives! Everything can be handled via private contracts, freely entered into by rational actors. Sewers? Let developers build their own! Roads? Make them for-profit operations funded by user fees! Why, I bet, you could even privatize *fire protection!*



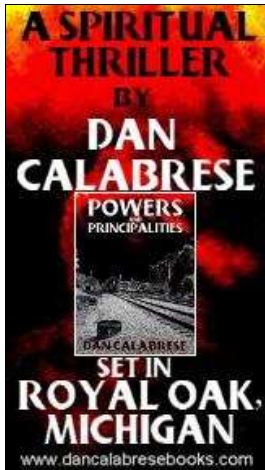
Burn one down, dude.

There are some things that sound absolutely fantastic in theory. Time travel is like that. Physicists believe you could actually travel through time if you could only travel many multiples faster than the speed of light. Dude! Let's go! The only problem you'll have on your way to 2110, where you seek to find out if the Lions manage to win a Super Bowl at any point in the next 100 years, is that if you actually go as fast as the theory requires, you will instantly set yourself on fire and shoot every molecule in your body flying clear across to the other side of the galaxy.

Small glitch. We'll get right on fixing that.

So when South Fulton, Tennessee tried to turn fire protection into a fee-for-service proposition, it seemed like a great idea. Ah, liberty, sweet liberty. The fee would be voluntary. If you wanted to opt out of the system, you could choose not to pay the \$75 annual fee. That's the choice Gene Cranick made, which is why, when his house began burning, the firefighters just stood there and watched it.

Libertarianism in action! A man makes a choice, freely and of his own volition, and he has to live with the consequences. It's cold, it's hard and it's seemingly logical. The only problem is that no one but the most emotionally disconnected among us can abide the actual result in South Fulton. And this brings us to the rational ground conservatives might claim as their own – between the extreme of left-wing government nannyism and the extreme of the libertarian utopia in which there is no such thing as community.



It goes against every instinct a firefighter has to stand there and watch a house burn to the ground. There are a lot of reasons for that. That is the home of a family of human beings. Your whole purpose in life is to protect such things. We all know people make bad choices and have to suffer the consequences, but we also know we have ability to freely make our own choices about when and where to help.

You can make an economic argument, as well, about why an arrangement like this was pennywise and pound foolish. Do you own a home? What do you pay every year in property taxes? I bet it's a lot more than \$75. So what happens to the local tax base if your house burns down? I suppose the libertarian answer would be, "End property taxes!" But this simply demonstrates that you can't actually live in their bizarre utopia, because every incongruence requires an even screwier incongruence in order to keep the whole thing from coming completely apart at the seams.

This is where rational conservatism comes in. This is not a form of conservatism that hates all government, but rather a form that makes rational choices about when it makes sense to tax and spend. It values the things people truly need – like police and fire protection, or education – and is willing to tax reasonably and spend wisely to provide them. But it insists on managing them far better than what we see today. It brings the operation home to the local level wherever possible. It refuses to let these institutions become employment protection rackets for slothful bureaucrats and public employee unions. But it doesn't have a problem with the idea that communities matter, or that communities need these things, or that everyone should help pay for them.

It also rejects the idea that Washington has much of a role in any of it. It sees communities and states as perfectly capable of deciding what to do about education, agriculture, law enforcement, health care and infrastructure. Rather than having Washington's "help," it would prefer to keep the money at the local level to begin with, and let Washington "help" by reducing the tax burden it imposes on people who are already paying enough at any number of other levels.

The founders believed in limited government, not no government. Those who seek to honor the founders today should commit themselves to good government where government is needed, and to the slashing of government where it has become too big, too burdensome and too willing to impose long-term debt on the public for its own self-perpetuation.

That's the sort of government most Americans would actually get behind. If conservatives don't provide it when they get a chance, they're going to get lost in the clamor of voices between the big-government left and the libertarian stoners who don't have a problem with burning one down – whether it's a joint or a man's home – because they confuse limited government with the end of all community, and they confuse liberty with the complete elimination of all concern for one's fellow man.

That's what they found out this week in South Fulton. Do the rest of us need to get burned in the same way?