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Republicans may finally be socially distancing themselves from libertarianism

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President Trump's extension Sunday of federal social distancing guidelines surely will reduce the coronavirus's spread. It might, however, also begin to encourage mainstream Republicans to distance themselves in the future from libertarian-tinged economics.

It is difficult to underestimate the influence of libertarian principles on Republican economic policy. Nearly every economist or economic journalist revered by the party advocates for policies that are derived from libertarian impulses. In this worldview, individual freedom is the highest good and capable of near magical accomplishments. Let people do what they want, the story goes, and they will cure poverty, bring world peace and do better at managing social discord than any centrally planned government act can ever hope to accomplish.

These beliefs were at least partly behind efforts to persuade Trump to not extend the guidelines. The libertarians — or “classical liberals,” as they sometimes call themselves — argued that controls on personal liberty were too strict and that the magic of market exchanges would thus wither on the vine. As a result, they argued, the public health models saying hundreds of thousands or perhaps millions of Americans would perish without the guidelines were off by orders of magnitude. The arguments were cloaked in statistics and cost-benefit analysis, but the moral impulse behind them was a devotion to individual liberty as the highest good.

The insistence from Rep. Thomas Massie (R-Ky.) last week that Congress convene to approve the \$2 trillion rescue bill was the *reductio ad absurdum* of these impulses. The libertarian gadfly insisted that his peers risk their health and the health of their staff even as he acknowledged he had no chance of doing more than forcing a recorded vote for a bill that everyone knew would pass. His futile gesture was roundly condemned by Trump and others, but he at least deserves recognition for carrying the libertarian devotion to individual liberty to its logical conclusion.

Pure libertarianism of the sort promulgated by think tanks such as the Cato Institute is, of course, almost nonexistent in party circles, as those bemoaning high federal spending or the religious

right's influence will tell you. Even libertarian icons such as Sen. Rand Paul (R-Ky.) or Rep. Justin Amash (I-Mich.) publicly support much higher levels of government activity than do many of the thinkers and activists who sing their praises. But that simply means that prudent libertarian Republicans don't push their principles to their logical ends, even if their principles color their arguments and shape their policy proposals.

Trump dashed the hopes of libertarians because he grasps what they do not: People love freedom, but they love security as much or more. Time and again, people draw together in support of strong government to protect them from something fearful they cannot handle on their own. War and civil unrest are classic events that persuade people that strong mandatory measures are necessary; the current pandemic is another.

Belief that liberty is just one of many human goods informs policies in normal times as well. The modern social welfare state is grounded in the idea that some measure of economic security, opportunity and equality are necessary parts of a decent life. Policies designed to achieve these goals all impose on individual liberty through taxes and regulation. But a supermajority of Americans approves of that endeavor and disagrees only about the specific burdens to be imposed. They do not believe that liberty is the one true god before which all should bow.

Blinded by their implicit libertarian principles, however, many Republican politicians still often refuse to see this simple truth. Former House speaker Paul D. Ryan (R-Wis.) insisted on cutting entitlement spending to ensure taxes never rose higher than 19 percent of GDP, as if there were something magical about that arbitrary figure. Former governors such as Bobby Jindal of Louisiana and Sam Brownback of Kansas destroyed their political careers pursuing supply-side tax plans that caused deep cuts in spending on education and health programs. They and others lashed their futures to the mast of libertarian-inspired ideology only to find their ships crashed upon the rocks of public opinion.

The pandemic's aftermath will see many Republicans abandon this path. The crisis began with a communist power that does not act responsibly toward its citizens or trading partners. It also exposed how dependent the United States is on China for simple things, such as antibiotics. Responsible conservatives will try to right this imbalance in the name of national security and general welfare, even if it means curtailing the liberty to trade. As the pandemic continues, it will be much easier for Republican voters and politicians to cast off the rose-colored libertarian glasses they have worn for far too long.