

WASHINGTON **Examiner**

Market-skeptical conservative group forms to wage war on a straw man

Brad Polumbo

February 19, 2020

A new group, American Compass, launched on Tuesday to much fanfare. The group's mission is reportedly “going back and finding things that always were part of the American tradition that have been important to conservative thinkers but that seem to have gotten lost in the more market-fundamentalist mode of, especially, the last 20 to 30 years.”

Led by former Manhattan Institute scholar Oren Cass, the group has drawn impressive names to its nascent effort to charter an intellectual course for the nationalist Right.

There's just one problem: The “market-skeptical” conservative movement is railing against an imaginary libertarian GOP orthodoxy that does not and, frankly, never really has existed. The idea motivating this entire project is completely detached from reality and all recent political history.

Cass posits that the GOP has “outsourc[ed] economic policymaking to libertarian ‘fundamentalists’ who see the free market as an end unto itself.” In this, he and his ideological allies are waging war on a straw man.

Consider the GOP in recent decades. Has it really been “free market fundamentalist” and obsessed with fiscal conservatism? I wish. In reality, the supposedly libertarian Republican Party and free market conservative intelligentsia have presided over an explosion in the scope of the federal government and the addition of trillions to the federal debt.

According to the Cato Institute, President George W. Bush actually grew the federal government faster than his Democratic successor, President Barack Obama. Under Bush, federal employment grew nearly 14%, as compared to just 8% under Obama. Meanwhile, far from balancing the budget, the Bush administration added a whopping \$6 trillion to the national debt. Oh, and Bush even instituted tariffs to protect the steel industry, the kind of anti-market policy these new conservatives apparently stand for. The tariffs failed horribly, for what it's worth.

Is that GOP record really what “rigid libertarian orthodoxy” looks like?

It's not just Bush, either. As far as congressional Republicans go, they've hardly been any more “fundamentalist” in their commitment to free market economics in recent decades. The GOP has repeatedly helped pass socialist “farm bills” subsidizing rich landowners and agricultural interests, fought for bloated defense budgets, and protected socialist international subsidy programs such as the Export-Import Bank.

So, Cass and other market-skeptical conservative critics have it entirely backward — the real problem is that, in the last several decades, the GOP hasn't been fiscally conservative or committed to free markets.

Of course, we should all welcome the emergence of new ideas and energy into the conservative intellectual movement. There's little doubt that new policies and new voices are sorely needed. Yet, attacking a straw man of a libertarian-dominated GOP accomplishes nothing. Market-skeptical conservatives ought to launch an intellectual war against something that actually exists.