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Bernie Sanders' socialism versus the Founding Fathers' libertarianism

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From the beginning of the American Republic, there has been an ongoing struggle between those who believe in a bigger, stronger government and those who believe in a smaller and less interventionist government. Starting with Bernie Sanders, many who believe in bigger government have, without embarrassment, started calling themselves “socialists.” And increasingly, those who believe in smaller government with more liberty have been referring to themselves as “libertarians.”

Political language gets corrupted by those who write about politics. Many in the mainstream media lump libertarian Sen. Rand Paul in with Nazi (national socialist) Hitler, as being on the extreme “right,” when, in fact, Hitler had far more in common with the beliefs of socialist Bernie Sanders, a man of the “left.” Those who believe in limited government and more liberty used to be called “liberals,” and they still are in much of Europe. Bigger-government types started referring to themselves as “liberals” because it was a good word — and so old-school liberals, in response, started referring to themselves as “classical liberals,” which is fine, but most people have no clue as to what it means. Big-government types, having a long history of failed programs, destroyed many of the positive connotations of the word “liberal,” and started calling themselves “progressives,” even though many of their programs are anti-progress.

Many conservatives became comfortable with big government as long as they were in control of it — which is quite different from the concept of “conservative” as best defined by the 18th century Anglo-Irish statesman Edmund Burke. Over time, both the “liberal” Democratic Party and the “conservative” Republican Party became comfortable with considerable state intervention into people’s lives. The Republican Party had and has an ongoing low-level civil war between the “Goldwater” (smaller government) and “Rockefeller” (bigger government) Republicans.

Some saw the solution in a new political party which would embrace the classical liberal or libertarian principles of the American Founders. (The American Founders were greatly influenced by the first modern economist, Adam Smith, who published one of the world’s most influential books, “Wealth of Nations,” in 1776 (a good year for liberty). (Smith explained how unintended society wealth and civilizing behavior was created by individuals operating in their own self-interest when government-protected private property and the rule of law.)

The high priest of the movement to return to the principles of the Founders as expressed in the U.S. Constitution was Ed Crane, co-founder of the libertarian Cato Institute. Mr. Crane almost single-handedly made libertarianism respectable and gave it intellectual coherence. Before the now-retired Mr. Crane, the few who called themselves libertarians were often hippie-like odd-balls. Mr. Crane wore business suits and spoke and looked like an investment banker, which he

had been. He articulated, in a good-humored and appealing manner, a coherent vision of less government spending, less regulation, less taxation, a non-interventionist foreign policy, and a tolerance for individualistic lifestyles, as well as a strong commitment to civil liberties.

American history is replete with attempts to form new political parties based around some appealing ideas — and when enough Americans embrace the ideas, one or both of the major parties steal them. The same thing happened to Mr. Crane and his fellow libertarians, where many politicians — particularly Republicans — altered their rhetoric, if not their behavior, to sound like libertarians. A shadow of the Libertarian Party still exists, which serves the purpose of keeping some elected politicians sufficiently fearful of a third-party candidate, causing them to act more libertarian than they otherwise would.

On the other side is socialism, meaning state ownership or control of economic activities, which comes in endless varieties. Many endorse some socialist programs like public transportation or national health care, but rarely socialist restaurants (particularly those who had the non-pleasure of eating at government-run restaurants in the old USSR). There are two basic problems with socialism: First, it is based on coercion rather than free choice; and second, it does not work. When someone tells me he or she is a socialist, I immediately think this person is stupid, and/or ignorant of history, and/or has a warped need to control the lives of others.

The tragedy of our time is that not an insignificant portion of the American people (mainly the young) say they support socialism — as if the 100 million-plus people killed by their own socialist governments in the last century, and the ongoing horrors of Cuba, Venezuela and North Korea are merely imaginary. Most American socialists claim they believe in a benign socialism — while failing to recognize that it is all based on coercion, which tends to lead to more coercion as the earlier programs fail, which leads to more coercion until all is lost.

The American Founding Fathers were instinctively libertarians with a few exceptions, such as supporting a national post office and some public health programs (not private health care), for example draining the swamps to get rid of malaria bearing mosquitos, etc. The debate about the proper role of government is never-ending. Most political labels have been too corrupted by the press to give voters much guidance. Thus, responsible voters will need to do more of their own homework as to the likely economic and liberty consequences of a candidate's proposals.