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Libertarianism, Rightly Conceived

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Economist Jeffrey Sachs has joined the critics who, over the last year or so, are dismissing libertarianism as a simple-minded philosophy. In "[Libertarian Illusions](#)," Sachs takes libertarians to task for "championing liberty to the exclusion of all other values." "Libertarians," Sachs writes, "hold that individual liberty should never be sacrificed in the pursuit of other values or causes. Compassion, justice, civic responsibility, honesty, decency, humility, respect and even survival of the poor, weak and vulnerable -- are to take a back seat."

In fact, most libertarians believe that the "other values or causes" listed by Professor Sachs are best promoted by promoting liberty. We believe so strongly in liberty because we believe that all those values are vital to humanity. At bottom, what ties libertarians together is the notion of a "presumption of liberty" -- that state action needs justification, not human freedom. This idea is far from controversial and, in fact, it is the founding principle of the modern liberal state.

Moreover, the government's track record in promoting Sachs' "other values or causes" is not stellar, to say the least. It is hardly compassionate or just to send a man to prison for life because he [was caught](#) smoking marijuana three times. It is hardly civic responsibility to lay waste to entire communities in the name of "urban renewal." It is hardly honest for members of Congress to leave office [five times richer](#) than when they entered. It is hardly decent to not let two people who love each other, of whatever sex, to marry. And forcing attendance in abysmal schools hardly promotes the survival of the poor, weak and vulnerable. A "presumption of liberty" would go a long way to addressing each of these tragic government failures.

Most libertarians recognize that there are situations for governments to step in and fill a gap that is not being filled through voluntary cooperation, including the possibility of a social safety net. But redistribution, if it is tried, should only come after rectifying a government monopoly on public education that has locked the poorest and most vulnerable into horrible government schools. It should only come after repealing onerous regulations that disproportionately hurt

small businesses (regulations that were likely created by collusion between big business and big government). It should only come after ending a hopeless war on drugs that is [destroying black America](#). In short, redistribution should only come after the government stops hurting those who need the most help.

Libertarianism not only promotes a robust defense of liberty, it advances an equally vigorous attack on the efficacy of government. Any government program that is tried must be truly in the "public interest" and not just in the interests of lawmakers seeking another term in office, interest groups promoting their well-being at the expense of the general welfare or to the detriment of future generations that will be saddled with unimaginable amounts of debt in order to achieve immediate, politically attractive goals.

These criticisms don't strike most people as off-the-wall because it seems most people believe that government is wasteful and inefficient. The list is notorious and extensive: fifty-dollar wrenches purchased by the State Department, subsidies to tobacco growers while simultaneously waging a war against smoking, roads to nowhere, carve-outs, kickbacks and back-room deals. Members of Congress have long been portrayed by stand-up comedians and sitcom writers as self-serving crooks, and bureaucrats are often lambasted in a similar fashion.

Yet, despite this increasing resistance, government moves forward, powered by its own internal forces. Those forces need not, and often do not, align with good governance in the public interest. Large, long-term benefits packages [are given](#) to public-sector employees in lieu of current pay raises because the politicians giving them out don't want the political liability of raising taxes on voters now. They would rather pass the financial and political costs down the line to their political successors. Similarly, Congress passes a massive health care overhaul that [unconstitutionally forces](#) individuals to purchase a product from a private company, a tactic also designed to avoid the political liability of a massive tax increase. We want it all but we don't want to pay for it, and a politician will always be there to ask "what do you want?" Yet it is the wise man who asks "what do you want more?"

So, perhaps the biggest difference between libertarians and the dominant political ideologists is simply this: while they believe that the problem with government is that the right people aren't in power, we believe that the problem with government is intrinsic to government itself, and that no theory of "throw the bums out" will ever give state officials the incentives and knowledge they need to do a good job. This is true despite the fact that the vast majority of government representatives and employees are good, hard-working people.

With the increasing prominence of Ron Paul, it is becoming apparent that more people are beginning to understand this fact. Professor Sachs' attempt to discredit Ron Paul by attacking the stereotypical libertarian hermit addresses none of the issues outlined above. Ultimately, Sachs' characterization of libertarians deserves no more attention than the

epithet of "socialist!" that those on the right often throw at the left. Both are straw-man arguments that fail to appreciate the nuances of the respective philosophies they attack.