

By [Robert A. Levy](#)

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Libertarianism is a political philosophy grounded on these propositions: Adult individuals have the right and responsibility to decide important matters about their own lives, but they may not infringe on the equal rights of others. Government's role is to secure those rights. The key word, from the Declaration of Independence, is "secure," not "grant." We do not get our rights from government. Individuals have natural rights, independent of government. That's a bedrock libertarian principle and, it's fair to say, the Founders were libertarians.

Within that framework, consider the polemic against libertarianism by Rev. Michael P. Orsi ("Libertarian Candidate Not Good," *Naples Daily News*, March 16) — as reduced to five assertions:

**1. "Extreme individualism" is contrary to the "common good."**

Libertarians understand the necessity of cooperation to attain personal goals. My colleague, Tom Palmer, observes that individuals can "never actually be self-sufficient, which is precisely why we must have rules to make peaceful cooperation possible." Government enforces those rules. The risk, however, is that rules too extensive will produce, not a common good for all, but rather a veneer for a system of special favors to secure largesse for the politically connected at the expense of others. By contrast, individualism promotes the common good, spontaneously, as long as no commanding power preempts freely chosen actions.

**2. Belief in "every man for himself" is incompatible with "concern for the poor."**

From an ethical perspective, it may be morally right to help the poor; but in a completely free society we should have a political right not to do so. Put differently, a theory of justice is not always congruent with a theory of politics. One can condemn bad conduct without empowering government to take remedial action. Yes, charity is a virtue. But government-compelled charity is a contradiction in terms — a political act that negates real charity, which must be voluntary, not coerced.

As it happens, the evidence proves conclusively that more wealth, including a greater abundance for the poor, is a by-product of individual liberty.

**3. Government intervention is sometimes necessary — for example, "to prevent monopolies."**

Libertarians are not opposed to reasonable safety regulations, sensible compromises of civil liberties to enhance national security, or even selective gun controls. Moreover, we recognize that markets are not perfect. But neither is government. The proper comparison is not "unfettered" freedom versus a perfectly managed world. Instead, the relevant tradeoff is free markets versus the reality of government intervention. No doubt, government occasionally does

good things. But the equation isn't complete without considering the bad things that inevitably accompany the good.

With respect to monopolies, true barriers to economic enterprise arise from government misbehavior, not private power. Special-interest legislation and misconceived regulatory regimes protect existing producers from competition. Exclusive licenses to privileged rivals nurture monopolies at public expense. Targeted tax benefits, subsidies, guarantees, and loans; or tariffs and quotas to protect domestic companies from foreign imports, spawn the same anti-competitive environment that antitrust laws are meant to foreclose. Corporations exploit the law — consorting with members of Congress, their staffers, and the best lobbying firms that money can buy. Too often, that's the practical consequence of government intervention.

#### **4. “Isolationism” cannot be reconciled with our “obligation to help weaker nations.”**

Paradoxically, conservatives, who are justifiably skeptical about the efficacy of government in domestic matters, are eager to embrace a more expansive role for government overseas, in the name of national greatness. Even after Vietnam, Iraq, and our endless war in Afghanistan, interventionists are fixated on exporting democracy — urging military responses to sometimes-illusory crises. The result has been imperial wars, American lives lost, and wealth transfers to corrupt dictators. That's not a foreign policy a libertarian can support.

#### **5. Same-sex marriage and drug legalization are at odds with “truly conservative principles.”**

It's nice to end on a note of agreement. The libertarian position on same-sex marriage and drug legalization is indeed liberal, not conservative — even as our position on fiscal issues is conservative, not liberal. Does that mean libertarians are philosophically inconsistent? No, it means conservatives and liberals are. Conservatives want smaller government in the fiscal sphere, but they condone bigger government when it comes to empire building and regulating personal behavior. Liberals want fewer government restrictions in the social sphere, but they embrace strict limits on economic liberty.

Unlike liberals and conservatives, libertarians have a consistent, minimalist view of the proper role of government. We want government out of our wallets, out of our bedrooms, and out of foreign entanglements unless America's vital interests are at stake.

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