



## Hayek Shows How the Rhetoric of Freedom Fanned the Flames of Extreme Conservatism

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As recently as September, Trump's popularity on the American Right perplexed our nation and was considered "inexplicable" by bastions of conservative values. The Dallas Morning News, in refusing to offer him an endorsement, noted that "Trump is—or has been—at odds with nearly every GOP ideal this newspaper holds dear." Even today there's widespread confusion on both sides of the political aisle as to what the Republican Party stands for and how an authoritarian-like Trump became its leader. Moreover, the few explanations that have been offered are facile, improbable and politically convenient—e.g. "Barack Obama led to the rise of Trump."

But there is an explanation. We can better understand how the "Party of Liberty" end up with Donald Trump as its standard-bearer by starting with a lesser known insight offered by the political philosopher Friedrich Hayek. Hayek helps us understand how the rhetoric of freedom fanned the flames of extreme conservatism; He argued that two different political traditions on the American Right have been lumped together and confused under the name "conservative."

On the one hand, there are those who want to conserve the principles of political freedom on which our country was founded—ideals such as inalienable rights, religious tolerance, and limiting arbitrary power. Owen Harries, the foreign policy intellectual and founding editor of *The National Interest*, is a good example of this tradition on the American Right. On the other hand, there are conservatives by temperament who want to conserve traditional social structures—who fear change and the unknown more generally. This political tradition follows William F. Buckley Jr's famous definition of a conservative—someone who "stands athwart history, yelling stop."

Conservatism by temperament—and in particular the extreme version of this conservatism—tends against the ideals of political freedom on which this country was founded. In particular, Hayek argued that a fear of change and the unknown makes people:

- More inclined to seek security and repose in the authority of personality (at the expense of institutions, process, and the rule of law);
- Less tolerant of moral and religious pluralism, and tending instead toward simplistic certainty;

- More hostile to the empirical world, especially facts that appear to threaten social stability (however falsely);
- Prone to strident nationalism and imperialism (e.g. “take the oil”).

Sound familiar? There are reasons for Trump’s appeal on the Right. Already in 2006, Brink Lindsey at the CATO Institute lamented: “Just look at the causes that have been generating the real energy in the conservative movement of late: building walls to keep out immigrants...”

But how did conservative temperament eventually win out over political freedom? How did the conservative “id” beat the conservative “ego”?

Conservative elites like to pretend they have had nothing to do with today’s “Alt-Right”, branding it a populism that arose “inexplicably.” But in doing so, they turn a blind eye to long-standing political developments and, for many, their own ironic role in fomenting Trumpism.

For decades, conservative elites degraded the American ideal of Liberty to a simplistic dogma against government—against Washington. This misguided zealotry was greatly reinforced by powerful special interests such as the fossil fuel and tobacco industries, who benefit from the corruption of inactive government. As a result, we find on the American Right today a fear of and a hostility toward foreigners and non-whites to be sure—but also the federal government. These exaggerated fears are cut from the same cloth and lead to a similar place.

Consumed by a Jihad against government, the Right’s focus shifted almost entirely away from the business of legislating and solving practical problems as they arise to staunch opposition and promoting fears that animate conservative extremism. Lucid policy was eventually replaced or overawed with paranoid warnings about “death panels”, hyperinflation, government statistics, the Federal Reserve and the EPA. During the election, Charles Krauthammer may have raised strong objections to Trump such as bemoaning Trump’s paranoid assertion that our election was “already rigged.” But how fantastic was Trump’s claim next to Krauthammer’s own fairly recent assertion that Obama’s measured efforts to reduce carbon pollution under the Clean Air Act will make “Stalin’s five-year plans look like a picnic”?

In fanning the flames of conservative extremism, but doing so under the false pretense of political freedom, the American Right in recent years has followed headlong down a dangerous path to which Hayek warned explicitly. Conservative pundits, who just five years ago offered rousing support for Tea Party stars such as Michele Bachmann, but now oppose Trump, should ask how they differ? Trump rose to political prominence with Birtherism, Bachmann by darkly stating that Obama may harbor “anti-American views.” Trump, like Bachmann, plays to the zeal of conservatism unbound—the raw fears of “otherness” and change. The biggest difference is Trump dispenses with the rhetoric of freedom. This shift, more than any other single factor, explains the Right’s shock surrounding his appeal and ascent to power.

Going forward, the path to recovery lies not with the raw appeal to fear and to a conservatism unbound, but with an earnest consideration of the principles of political freedom common to all.