

Re: R.I.P., P. J. O'Rourke

By DAN MCLAUGHLIN
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Unlike [David Harsanyi](#), I never had the pleasure of meeting P. J. O'Rourke or corresponding with him, but like most conservative and libertarian writers who came of age in the 1980s or later, I was greatly influenced by O'Rourke. His writing was, along with that of Dave Barry, proof of the adage that libertarians make the best humorists, because they can be irreverent toward anything and anyone with authority. That is not to say that all libertarians have a sense of humor, but O'Rourke knew how to poke fun at his own, too. His [1993 address to the Cato Institute](#) is a famous classic statement of the libertarian credo:

The Cato Institute has an unusual political cause — which is no political cause whatsoever. We are here tonight to dedicate ourselves to that cause, to dedicate ourselves, in other words, to ... nothing. We have no ideology, no agenda, no catechism, no dialectic, no plan for humanity. We have no “vision thing,” as our ex-president would say, or, as our current president would say, we have no Hillary . . .

Freedom is not empowerment. Empowerment is what the Serbs have in Bosnia. Anybody can grab a gun and be empowered. It's not entitlement. An entitlement is what people on welfare get, and how free are they? It's not an endlessly expanding list of rights — the “right” to education, the “right” to health care, the “right” to food and housing. That's not freedom, that's dependency. Those aren't rights, those are the rations of slavery — hay and a barn for human cattle. There is only one basic human right, the right to do as you damn well please. And with it comes the only basic human duty, the duty to take the consequences . . .

We have a group of incredibly silly people in the White House right now, people who think government works. Or that government would work, if you got some real bright young kids from Yale to run it. We're being governed by dorm room bull session. The Clinton administration is over there right now pulling an all-nighter in the West Wing. They think that, if they can just stay up late enough, they can create a healthy economy and bring peace to former Yugoslavia.

You should take a few minutes to read the whole thing, which 29 years later has more quotable lines in fewer than 900 words than a lot of writers produce in a lifetime.

O'Rourke's travel columns were classics, and his social commentary could be biting, but his masterpiece was *Parliament of Whores*, his 1991 classic in which, as the book's subtitle declared, “a lone humorist attempts to explain the entire U.S. government.” Just 233 pages in paperback, it succeeds more than well enough to be worth passing a copy to every high-school or

college student you know who could use both a refresher in civics and a lesson in why a free citizenry should laugh at its own government. And its political parties:

Giving money and power to government is like giving whiskey and car keys to teenage boys. . . . Democrats are . . . the party of government activism, the party that says government can make you richer, smarter, taller and get the chickweed out of your lawn. Republicans are the party that says government doesn't work, and then they get elected and prove it.

As far as I'm concerned, it remains the best book ever written about American government, pithier and more insightful than many lengthier, more sincere, and more scrupulous tomes. While its specific examples are a snapshot of the pre-Gulf War George H. W. Bush presidency, its ability to capture the ethos of the system is to our federal governance what Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* was to the character of American republican and democratic culture. O'Rourke brings his vicious humor to every branch and agency of the federal government he can locate, plus the 1988 political conventions, to boot. His chapter on farm policy is the best thing I've ever read on the subject; when I attempted a takedown of the 2008 farm bill, I began by quoting O'Rourke:

Farm policy, although it's complex, can be explained. What it can't be is believed. No cheating spouse, no teen with a wrecked family car, no mayor of Washington, DC, videotaped *in flagrante delicto* has ever come up with anything as farfetched as U.S. farm policy.

His account of a Housing NOW! march is sidesplitting. Along his journey he encounters everyone from Pat Moynihan to Mike Dukakis to Ken Starr to Curtis Sliwa. As O'Rourke wrote of the man who would run for New York City mayor 30 years later:

I wanted a good look at this poverty we don't have and can't cure, so I called Curtis Sliwa, founder of the Guardian Angels. The Guardian Angels are, like Batman, Miss Marple and the Baker Street Irregulars, unarmed amateur fighters of crime. Such groups are ubiquitous in popular fiction but never exist in real life. Unarmed amateur crime fighting would be useless in a lawful society and suicidal in a lawless one. In America, however, we have managed to produce a combination of vandalized wealth and spoiled want, police legalism and ACLU firepower that makes something as fundamentally absurd as the Guardian Angels not only possible but a godsend. And it says a lot about the nature of American poverty that I went to see it with a group of young men trained in the martial arts and operating under military-style discipline instead of with a social worker.

Looking back in the mid-2000s, I cringed at the line in the chapter on American foreign policy in Pakistan and Afghanistan, where O'Rourke wrote, "The main thing to be learned about foreign policy in this part of the world is that a wise foreign policy would be one that kept you out of here. There are some things you ignore at your peril, but you pay attention to Central Asia at the risk of your life." While he was wrong about our ability to ignore Afghanistan, however, our two-decade odyssey there since 2001 only proves that O'Rourke's humor always had a point worth thinking about.

We will miss the laughs, and we will also miss the points. R.I.P.