



Libertarians to Christie: Bring It On

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In what could be called the first volley of the 2016 Republican primary, New Jersey Governor Chris Christie called the strain of libertarianism concerned with recent NSA civil-liberties violations a “very dangerous thought.” He also accused Republican lawmakers such as Senator Rand Paul (R-KY) of forgetting the lessons of September 11.

Christie’s comments underscore a growing rift in the Republican Party between the more libertarian minded and those who adhere to more traditional Republican stances of social conservatism and strong foreign policy. It’s high time for the Republican Party to have this fight and to see which faction voters will favor. My bet is on the libertarians.

Governor Christie came to prominence by forcibly, and laudably, attacking recalcitrant teachers’ unions. He has been an effective proponent of limited government in some areas, but, like so many Republicans, his support has been piecemeal, which undermines other parts of his message. The fight for limited government needs fewer fair-weather fans. Enter the libertarians.

Libertarianism’s ascendancy is not surprising. In the face of endless wars, endless debt, endless spending, and endless violations of our civil liberties, most politicians are giving us endless prattle assuring us to go about our business and to “pay no attention to the man behind the curtain.” The man behind the curtain, unfortunately, is an increasingly unified political class that is becoming more divorced from average Americans.

As the warfare/welfare state grows, it becomes more likely that libertarianism can happen to you. It’s easy to ignore government when it is small, but when it storms your business with armed SWAT officers to make sure your barbers are properly licensed, libertarianism can happen to you. People are increasingly encountering obstructionist, if not oppressive, government in their everyday lives. It’s not surprising that more people are adopting libertarian stances on a variety of issues.

New revelations about massive NSA domestic-spying programs (revelations that libertarians warned us about) are just the latest example of libertarianism “happening” to more people. Staying away from a massive government dragnet of its own citizens may be impossible, and unsurprisingly, 56 percent of Americans now believe that federal courts fail to provide adequate limits on NSA surveillance.

Those Americans have not “forgotten 9/11,” as Governor Christie says. They’ve simply realized that the government should not be given a blank check written against our civil liberties.

Most millennials do not clearly remember a time when America was not at war. They’ve begun asking tough and important questions about whether the global war on terror has been worth it,

either in terms of American lives, American money or American liberties. Libertarians were asking those questions at the outset.

On many other issues, libertarians have been bellwethers for future changes in public opinion. Support for marijuana legalization is now supported by a majority of Americans. Support for gay marriage, something libertarians advocated before many people had even considered the idea, is also above 50 percent. And younger voters are supporting those issues at a much higher rate than older voters.

New student-led libertarian organizations such as Students for Liberty are growing at an alarming rate. Students for Liberty has spread to five continents in just six years, and just this past week held a libertarian conference in Nigeria. Surprisingly, rather than attracting most of its members from the ranks of conservatives, SFL is pulling almost equally from the left and the right. Addressing civil liberties abuses and stopping endless wars are two core issues for the growing libertarian youth movement.

Nevertheless, Governor Christie and many other Republicans stand against the tide of public opinion, particularly the opinions of younger demographics. Christie recently vetoed a bill that would have legalized same-sex marriage, and he has said he would veto any bill that decriminalized marijuana use.

After back-to-back defeats in presidential elections, Republicans now have a choice to make: Will they continue to oppose social and political trends and thus alienate younger voters, or will they seize the opportunity to articulate a consistent critique of government overreach and a principled defense of liberty?

When libertarianism was a much less influential political philosophy, the best response to the rare critique by a national political figure was “it’s nice to be noticed.” Now, a better response is: “bring it on.” Governor Christie might be right that libertarianism is a “dangerous” philosophy: dangerous to the election prospects of more traditional Republicans.