

Keeping It Real on ‘neo-Confederate Libertarians’

By: Josh Marshall- July 10, 2013

Why do the Pauls have such a problem again and again getting tied up with neo-Confederates and borderline white supremacists? It’s not just a prime example of that classic Onion headline “Why Do All These Homosexuals Keep Sucking My C\$#k?” It goes to the heart of what contemporary libertarianism is - or to put it more precisely, how there are very different movements and political agendas operating under that one label.

This whole subject has come up again because of the latest Rand Paul ghostwriter/aide brouhaha. And one-time TPMer Rachel Weiner has a excellent reported piece in the *Post* getting libertarians’ view on the stark division between the ‘neo-Confederate’ wing of their movement and what they call “cosmotarians.” It’s a good piece and she talks to various academics and activists within the libertarian movement.

But let me call a polite time out on this whole debate. The idea that there is a ideological divide or set of philosophical questions or priorities that makes some libertarians embrace the Confederacy and secession and despise Abraham Lincoln while others do not is, to put it generously, nonsense. Neo-Conderates, pro-secessionists, whatever else you want to call them are varying hues of white supremacists or to put it even more simply, *racists*. That’s not an accusation. It’s simply identifying them as a distinct political strain in American politics.

They may not be violent or actively call for legal discrimination against blacks or other non-whites. It’s also not wholly bound up with the racial polarity of whites and blacks. It also feeds off related but not identical nativist traditions in US politics, which adds an additional dose of conspiracy thinking and paranoia about the government being in the hands of sinister alien forces. But let’s not kid ourselves. That is what neo-Confederacy and all the rest of it are about, a vision of white supremacy expressed through a retrospective embrace of the Confederacy and the racial mores of the Jim Crow era. No one familiar with this phenomenon can question this.

Now I’m not saying that people who do Civil War reenactments or even people who are just really into Confederate history and nostalgia are like the folks I’m describing. Being a bit too much into Confederate nostalgia may be a sign of some questionable politics. But we’re talking here about a very specific neo-Confederate *political* movement in the United States, with a group of known voices, magazines and institutions, which has somehow managed to get itself listed as ‘libertarian’.

Let me also say that I don’t think this has anything to do with the people at the Cato Institute or Reason magazine or most of the other people tied to the libertarian movement or Libertarian

party going back forty years or so. It's not a movement I agree with on many things. But it's philosophically consistent, isn't basically about race but is a form of what I'd call hyper-individualism. Not my cup of tea but a perfectly legitimate political movement.

Part of the confusion, of course, if we can call it that, is that libertarians and 'neo-Confederates' do meet up on opposition to certain exertions of state power. Libertarians on principle; neo-Confederates because that's been the main vehicle for vindicating the rights of non-whites. More deeply though there's something about how the rhetoric of 'freedom' and 'liberty' appeals to the 'neo-Confederate' mindset which is paradoxical and considerably more toxic and corrosive than the ways many of us think about those terms. Freedom can also mean freedom from any check on my actions. My freedom. My group's freedom. A warlord who totally dominates his followers has a sort of perfect liberty and freedom. Just not quite the sort we think of in a civic context. It's the same authoritarian mindset of Stormfront and the militia crazies, just through this looking glass where it twists into 'freedom' and 'liberty'.

It's not for me to referee the intramural disputes within the libertarian movement. I'm sure they have no desire for me to try. But the neo-Confederates, the Lew Rockwells and that whole crew are fundamentally about white supremacy and nativism. And the Paul clan has been thick as thieves with those folks forever.

Who knows what's in their hearts and frankly who cares? But none of this latest stuff should surprise us. And I don't know why real libertarians waste any time making any sort of common cause with these folks. 'Neo-Confederacy' isn't some outgrowth of or logical deduction from libertarianism. You're a neo-Confederate because you believe in white supremacy. People who just can't figure why good upstanding libertarians keep ending up finding themselves connected up with people who really don't seem to like black people or Hispanics and believe in weird conspiracy theories about black helicopters stealing your lawn furniture really need to reread that Onion article.