

AMSPECBLOG

## Pinkerton Redefines Conservatism

By Philip Klein on 10.7.09 @ 7:33AM

Earlier this week I criticized Bobby Jindal for writing a health care op-ed in the *Washington Post* in which he endorsed a requirement that insurers cover those with pre-existing conditions, among other big government proposals. Because the requirement would also drive up the cost of insurance and lead to a federal mandate forcing individuals to purchase insurance or pay a tax, I argued that this was inconsistent with conservative principles. I wasn't alone in thinking this. Ramesh Ponnuru also criticized Jindal's proposal, and liberal blogger Ezra Klein wrote a post titled, "Bobby Jindal Embraces the Democratic Plan for Health-Care Reform." Yet surprisingly, Jim Pinkerton writes that he was "surprised" by my negative reaction:

Why the surprise on the Spectator's attack on Jindal? Because while the libertarian Cato Institute can always be expected to uphold ivory-tower free-market purity--completely abstracted from the chore of actual governance--conservatives, for the most part, have given themselves the task of forging a "governing conservatism." Libertarian heroes are figures such as Milton Friedman, Friedrich Hayek, and Ayn Rand, none of whom ever ran for office, much less were ever in charge of anything. Indeed, the great value of libertarian thinking is its purity; Cato, for example, provides an enormous service to the country by consistently upholding the "gold standard" of ideological purity.

By contrast, conservatism is a lumpier and more organic philosophy. Conservative heroes include Edmund Burke, Abraham Lincoln, Robert Taft, Barry Goldwater, and Ronald Reagan, all of whom not only won elections, but sought real change through the legislative and political process. Jindal is in that category, a conservative actively involved in governance. And so for conservative intellectuals who wish their side to win elections and then go on to make real policy changes, they might conclude that they need to work with Jindal and others like him, in order to hammer out art-of-the-possible solutions. Or maybe not.

Libertarianism and conservatism have a much more nuanced relationship with one another than Pinkerton lets on. It's true that on social issues and national security matters, there are lots of divisions between conservatives and libertarians, but when it comes to economic issues and free markets, there is less daylight.

The "libertarian heroes" Pinkerton mentions all played an influential role in conservatism. Hayek and Friedman are revered within the conservative movement, and Friedman's economic ideas formed part of the foundation of Reaganomics. Due to her extreme atheism, Rand is more

controversial among conservatives, but her moral defense of capitalism has been influential too. And this year, all of the talk of “going Galt” as well as the anger at the tea parties directed at government bureaucrats mooching off of their productivity is Randian in nature.

Also, if he's going to make a case for pragmatic governing conservatives, it's odd that Pinkerton would use the example of Barry Goldwater, who is best known for getting absolutely clobbered in a presidential election because he wanted to run a campaign based on principles. As Goldwater wrote in the *Conscience of a Conservative*:

"I have little interest in streamlining government or in making it more efficient, for I mean to reduce its size. I do not undertake to promote welfare, for I propose to extend freedom. My aim is not to pass laws, but to repeal them. It is not to inaugurate new programs, but to cancel old ones that do violence to the Constitution, or that have failed in their purpose, or that impose on the people an unwarranted financial burden. I will not attempt to discover whether legislation is 'needed' before I have first determined whether it is constitutionally permissible. And if I should later be attacked for neglecting my constituents' interests, I shall reply that I was informed their main interest is liberty and that in that cause, I am doing the very best I can."

Robert Poole, one of the early editors of *Reason* magazine, has called Goldwater “20th-century America's first libertarian politician.”

And as for Ronald Reagan, he himself declared that, “If you analyze it I believe the very heart and soul of conservatism is libertarianism... The basis of conservatism is a desire for less government interference or less centralized authority or more individual freedom and this is a pretty general description also of what libertarianism is... I stand on my statement that I think that libertarianism and conservatism are travelling the same path.”

While Pinkerton acknowledges that a government insurance mandate is “un-libertarian,” he asks, “Is it really un-conservative?”

Well, a mandate means that lawmakers in Washington would be forcing every breathing individual in America to purchase a product. Government bureaucrats would define what constitutes an acceptable version of that product. Every year when they file their taxes, Americans would have to submit documentation to the Internal Revenue Service proving that they have an acceptable version of that product. If they don't abide by the requirement, they will be forced to pay a tax to the federal government.

Thus, the mandate violates just about every conservative principle that there is. It's a violation of individual liberty. It's unconstitutional if you were to strictly interpret the document the way most conservatives would prefer. It would infringe on states' rights. And it would be a tax increase.

As a policy matter, I don't accept Pinkerton's false premise that in order to be serious about health care, conservatives have to embrace big government solutions such as Jindal is offering. As it happens, I have written on numerous occasions about alternative solutions to the health care crisis that involve getting government out of the way (see [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#)).

Ultimately, I think, Pinkerton makes a mistake by conflating conservatism with Republicanism. Republicans thought that passing the largest expansion of entitlements since the Great Society in the form of the Medicare prescription drug plan was a good example of practical politics and good governance. But most conservatives saw it as a betrayal of small-government principles.



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