

THE WEEK

It's time to create a libertarian ecosystem that doesn't welcome racists

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It is a lie, Tim Carney argues at the *Washington Examiner*, that "conservatives are just a bunch of racists." And yet, he adds, "conservatives need to do a better job convincing the racists that it's a lie."

The American right's racism problem is not about conservative ideas *per se*. That racists like some of the same things you like does not, of itself, make those things racist (though certainly it may prompt their re-examination) — see *The New York Times*' Ross Douthat's recent column teasing out some of this distinction. But, as Carney and Douthat both describe, the mainstream conservative movement has not made itself adequately inhospitable to racism.

"Every extended conversation I have with 20-something conservatives includes a discussion of how to deal with racist flirtations in their peer group," says Douthat, while Carney calls his fellow conservatives to the urgent task of "doing something to make clear that conservatism and racism don't mix."

Let me call libertarians to do the same.

I am far from the first to issue this appeal. The Cato Institute's Jonathan Blanks, himself black and libertarian, has written compellingly on the topic for *Libertarianism.org* and elsewhere, identifying a "longstanding libertarian habit of downplaying racism as a fact of life for minorities in the United States." Blanks levels much of his critique at libertarians' irresponsibly incomplete narrative of American history, which too often entails "looking backward to better times" of smaller government and freer markets while neglecting what *else* was happening then. For those "who must look to bills of sale and property lists to find our ancestors," Blanks writes, "the look back is with much less yearning."

Libertarian failure (or refusal) to recognize the non-state function of racism in American society today likewise makes our movement unappealing to black and other minority Americans regardless of the value of our ideas, Blanks continues. And some libertarians' willingness to partner with anti-statists of *any* stripe is also much to blame. This is best exemplified, of course, by the disgraceful "paleoliberalist" strategy of the 1980s and 1990s (in which some libertarians pursued "an open strategy of exploiting racial and class resentment to build a coalition with populist 'paleoconservatives'"), but it is not entirely absent from the present movement. See, for instance, this appalling post from former a Libertarian Party vice-chair, made in defense of his decision to appear on a white nationalist podcast.

This sort of thing does not only turn American minorities away from libertarians. It also turns racists toward us. And just as Carney says to conservatives, it is incumbent on libertarians to

create an ideological ecosystem that doesn't welcome racism. Our movement must make exceedingly clear that we are not congenial to white nationalism, even if the white nationalists happen to agree with us about the welfare state. (This should not have to be said!) As Carney notes, this is not for the sake of reputation. It's about doing the right thing. We should be actively making the libertarian movement a hostile environment for racism.

The unfortunate truth is that will mean a smaller libertarian movement, which I will concede may be a crushing prospect when your movement is already small. (Contrary to Tucker Carlson's bizarre claims from earlier this summer, libertarians do not run Washington.) But if anyone can embrace a lonely principled stand, it should be we notorious ideological perfectionists, right?

And anyway, this sloughing has already begun. *The Daily Beast* has described the phenomenon as a "libertarian to alt-right pipeline," noting that a number of prominent alt-right figures — like Christopher Cantwell, the "crying Nazi" of Charlottesville — at one point called themselves libertarian. The question is whether those transitions are happening in spite of libertarianism or because of it.

I and other libertarians would argue there is an inherent incompatibility between our ideas and those of the alt-right, both in the big picture and on many policy specifics. The suggestion that libertarianism will *temporarily* appeal to the contrarian or the simply angry checks out in my personal observation of the movement. In that sense, I think the emergence of the alt-right and the spotlight it has brought to attendant unsavories has for many former self-described libertarians provided an opportunity for accurate self-labeling: They were always un-libertarian racists, only now they admit it. Good riddance!

But the "no true Scotsman" explanation can't account for the entirety of this shift. Some of it is about policy overlap. Some of it is about what Rep. Thomas Massie (R-Ky.) has described as "voting for the craziest son of a bitch in the race." And some of it is about the failure of libertarians — actual libertarians, not Cantwells in sheep's clothing — to "do a better job convincing the racists" we are not of their number, and that we emphatically do not want them to be of ours.