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Libertarians Aren't All Selfish Jerks

By *Conor Friedersdorf*

They're said to only care about themselves. So why do they toil for other people's freedom?



With the U.S. waging multiple wars, the federal government bigger in size and scope than ever before, and civil liberties under unprecedented attack from the surveillance state, Stephen Metcalf has written a [jeremiad](#) against libertarianism, which he singles out as a force that ails America. It isn't that his whole critique is without merit. My own "[pragmatic libertarian](#)" sensibility is offended by some excesses he mentions. But there is a lot more wrong with his argument than right.

I'll address just one small part of it. He writes, as an aside, that libertarianism is the same thing as caring for nothing beyond one's own "naked self-interest." Let's devise an empirical test to see if this accurately characterizes the ideology. Over at *Reason*, America's leading libertarian magazine, I see that the story atop the Web site [asks](#), "Why is the government doing so little to end sexual assault in

prisons?" It's part of their July issue, dedicated to the criminal justice system, which it [labels](#) America's "national disgrace." On *Reason's* June cover is Sen. Rand Paul, who has recently tried to end America's war in Libya and to add civil liberties protections to the Patriot Act. The magazine's May [cover story](#) is about teachers' unions as an impediment to reform of public schools.

Over at the Institute for Justice, a libertarian public interest law firm, recent cases have been fought on behalf of [DC tour guides](#), [Florida interior designers](#), Louisiana [casket makers](#), Nashville [limo drivers](#), and Utah [hair braiders](#) keen on practicing their chosen professions without having to obtain a professional license. I fail to see how IJ lawyers or their libertarian donors benefit personally from lowering barriers to entry for far flung, mostly working class clients.

Meanwhile at the Cato Institute, David Boaz is [trying](#) to end the war on drugs, my friend [Julian Sanchez](#) is paid to explain how the federal government is using its power in the war on terrorism to expand the surveillance state, and his colleague Gene Healy is a critic of executive overreach and editor of a 2004 [book](#) on the federal government's over-criminalization of American life.

There are a lot of libertarians working on issues that *could* be construed as self-interested - lowering taxes is the obvious example. There are even some hard core Ayn Rand sycophants who embrace little more than themselves. Find that repugnant? Have at 'em! But you're just misinformed if you think that libertarians as a whole care for nothing more than their self-interest. Countless libertarians are working to advance the freedom and fair-treatment of people other than themselves. Often they do so more consistently than some of the liberals who sneer at them.

I leave you with a clip from Lawrence O'Donnell's TV show. Like many civil liberties advocates at the ACLU, anti-war activists, and critics of the criminal justice system, he is a liberal who understands that libertarians are among his most reliable allies when it comes to standing up for the freedom of other people:

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