

THE WEEK

Ebola and the death of the GOP's libertarian moment

Hurricane Katrina killed "compassionate conservatism." Has Ebola ended the GOP's latest dalliance with small government?

By [Peter Weber](#)

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The West African nations of Liberia, Guinea, and Sierra Leone have a huge Ebola problem. The United States doesn't — and won't — but American politicians do have a lesser problem: To quarantine or not to quarantine?

President Obama and top federal health officials are pretty clearly against mandatory quarantines for the "American heroes" who volunteered for the front lines of the Ebola war, as [Obama put it last week](#). "They deserve our gratitude and they deserve to be treated with dignity and respect." America's governors, on the other hand, are [all over the map](#).

It's not like there's an easy answer. The politics of Ebola are baffling and perilous.

In Texas, the only state where Ebola has spread, Gov. Rick Perry (R) has been criticized for not isolating the Dallas nurses and doctors treating Thomas Eric Duncan, the only person who has died of the disease in the U.S. New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie (R) and New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo (D) face criticism for instituting aggressive quarantines for all Americans returning from the three Ebola-afflicted nations — what *The Week's* William Falk calls "[quarantine theater](#)."

Cuomo has since backed off some; Christie insists, with trademark pugnacity, that [he has not](#).

And that seems to be the emerging pattern: As red and blue states alike dust off quarantine laws [rarely used](#) since the 1918 Spanish influenza pandemic, Republican governors talk up their heavy-handedness while Democrats insist their response is graduated and tailored to individual cases.

If the cruelly bumbling response to 2005's Hurricane Katrina was the death knell for George W. Bush's "compassionate conservatism" — which still lives on in No Child Left Behind and Medicare Part D, for example — Ebola is the bell tolling the demise of the GOP's five-year flirtation with conservative libertarianism.

The Republican Party has long touted itself as the party of limited government, opposed to the Democrats' supposed love of Big Government — even though the numbers [never really supported](#) those small-government pretensions. But starting in 2008, a confluence of events — Obama's election, the government's extraordinary measures to prop up the economy, Bush

fatigue, the "Ron Paul Revolution" — led to the creation of the Tea Party and the congressional GOP's "just say no" strategy. Republicans started walking the walk.

In the self-reinforcing narrative that followed, Obama and his "Chicago thugs" were bent on turning free America into a socialist dictatorship, usurping cherished personal freedoms (from gun-grabbing to "death panels"), and sending youths to re-education camps. And those are just [some of the things](#) prominent national Republican lawmakers said on the record. Scratch the surface a tiny bit and you get theories about locking up Christians in FEMA [concentration camps](#), complete with [disposable plastic coffins](#).

The first sign that this GOP dalliance with "live free or die" libertarianism is ending may have been the Clive Bundy standoff in Utah — here was the federal government actually moving in to seize a man's cattle — when no prominent Republicans stood up to defend him. Bundy apparently noticed and [bolted](#) for the Independent American Party. But the Ebola scare appears to mark the complete breakup of the GOP from its libertarian better half.

Gov. Christie isn't a great example — he's [never really been part](#) of the GOP's libertarian coquetry. But Gov. Paul LePage (R) of Maine is a telling case study. LePage, who's facing a tough re-election fight, is grappling with how to handle Kaci Hickox, the nurse Christie stuck in a quarantine tent after she returned from treating Ebola patients in Sierra Leone — until she threatened to sue him. Now she has returned to Maine, [declined to stay](#) in her house, and [refused to stay silent](#).

LePage eked out his 2010 win with [strong support](#) from government-overreach-wary, pro-"liberty" Tea Partiers and libertarians, and he [recently got an "A"](#) from the libertarian Cato Institute. But his threat to use "the full extent of his authority allowable by law" to keep Hickox in her house isn't sitting well with civil libertarians. The [ACLU rebuked LePage](#), for example, saying his "extreme measures like mandatory quarantines and police intervention raise serious concerns about government overreach."

If any Republican should be warning against involuntarily confining asymptomatic Americans to their homes, hospital wards, or tents, it's Sen. Rand Paul (R-Ky.), the GOP's Great Libertarian Hope. And in fact, on Sunday, [Paul told CNN's Candy Crowley](#) that "the libertarian in me is horrified at the idea of indefinitely detaining, or detaining anyone without a trial." At the same time, he added, "I'm not saying the government doesn't have a role in trying to prevent contagion."

When we get to the question of quarantine, it's a tough question.... I think there is a reasonable public concern, saying you shouldn't be going to the discotheque, you shouldn't be going to the local bar, you shouldn't be going to the local school cafeteria. [[Rand Paul](#) on CNN]

And Paul's protestations of horror would be more convincing if he hadn't [recently called for](#) a "quarantine" of West African countries and tried to scare the bejeezus out of college students by telling them Ebola is ["incredibly contagious"](#) and the White House is lying about it.

There are at least two compelling reasons for Republicans to ignore principled libertarianism, 40 years of research on Ebola transmission, and the faith-based groups like Samaritan's Purse that send doctors and nurses to West Africa: Polls and politics.

Politically, promoting Ebola panic helps drive conservatives to the voting booth and bolster their argument that Obama isn't keeping America safe. When people are frightened, [research suggests](#), they vote for conservative candidates.

And the polls show that Americans are in favor of the mandatory quarantine: 80 percent of respondents in a [recent CBS News poll](#) agree that Americans returning from West Africa should be isolated in quarantine until it is proven they don't have Ebola — even though 83 percent think it is unlikely or very unlikely they or anyone they know will contract Ebola. In an [NBC News/Wall Street Journal/Marist](#) poll, 82 percent of New Yorkers backed a 21-day quarantine for anyone who's been in contact with an Ebola patient, whether they show symptoms or not.

If a party wanted to give up on its internal libertarian, it turns out Ebola's a pretty good excuse, politically speaking. But with Republicans poised to increase their power in Congress, it seems relevant to ask what they're going to embrace in its place. In the meantime, expect a little bit of cognitive dissonance. A week ago, Fox News personality Greta Van Susteren sent out this head-scratching tweet:

A few days later, Van Susteren [got with the program](#), explaining that she blamed Obama because "he never set a national policy" on Ebola quarantines and urging Hickox to "just 'throw in the towel' and get some movies and stay home" because people are scared. (Interestingly, Van Susteren has [opened an orphanage](#) in Haiti with Samaritan's Purse.)

Americans *are* scared, or at least extremely risk-averse on Ebola. And libertarianism is once more on the fringes, a place it should be used to by now. But one party will surely come knocking on the libertarians' door again once it's out of power and at odds with whoever is calling the shots in Washington.