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Where Do Libertarians Belong?

A reason Debate

Brink Lindsey, Jonah Goldberg & Matt Kibbe from the August-September 2010 issue

For those who cherish the ideals of free minds and free markets, 21st century politics in the United States has not been a particularly welcoming place. The big-government conservatism of George W. Bush has been followed by the bigger- government liberalism of Barack Obama. The twin crises of 9/11 and the 2008 financial meltdown spawned the twin leviathans of national security hyperextension and the never-ending bailout. The nation's political class has rallied around the economic ideas of John Maynard Keynes, and the country's short-term financial picture only looks tenable when compared to the long-term fiscal nightmare that just about everyone agrees is coming.

So where should libertarians drop anchor and forge alliances within the famous four-sided Nolan Chart spectrum of political beliefs and groupings? In this exchange, Contributing Editor Brink Lindsey argues that it's time, once and for all, to sever the libertarian-conservative alliance that dates back to the New Deal while remaining skeptical about the illiberal populism of Tea Party activism. In response, a conservative writer—*National Review Online* Editor-at-Large Jonah Goldberg—disputes Lindsey's portrayal of the right and contends that the only major party giving free market economics the time of day is the GOP. Meanwhile, FreedomWorks President Matt Kibbe tells Lindsey and his think tank fellow travelers to climb down off that high horse and celebrate the most promising limited-government popular uprising in generations.

Right Is Wrong

Libertarians need to disengage from Republicans and conservatives once and for all.

By Brink Lindsey

By the waning years of the Bush administration, the old "fusionist" alliance between libertarians and social conservatives seemed to be on its last legs. After the inglorious collapse of Social Security reform, the political agenda of the right was more or less free of any contamination by libertarian ideas. The GOP sank into ruling-party decadence marked by borrow-and-spend fiscal incontinence and K Street Project cronyism. The broader conservative movement, meanwhile, expended its energy on gay-bashing, anti-immigrant hysteria, fantasies of World War IV, meddling in the Schiavo family tragedy, and

redefining patriotism as enthusiasm for mass surveillance and torture.

Now, however, opposition to Barack Obama and the Democratic Congress has sparked a resurgence of libertarian rhetoric on the right, most prominently in the “Tea Party” protests that have erupted over the past year. “Libertarian sentiment has finally gone mainstream,” wrote Chris Stirewalt, political editor of the conservative *Washington Examiner*, in a column this April. “After two wars, a \$12 trillion debt, a financial crisis and the most politically tone-deaf president in modern history, Americans may have finally given up on big government.”

Such talk gets many libertarians excited. Could a revival of small-government conservatism really be at hand? After the long apostasy of Bush *père et fils*, could the right really be returning to the old-time religion of Goldwater and Reagan? Could the withered fusionist alliance of libertarians and conservatives channel today’s popular disgust with statist excess into revitalized momentum for limited-government reform?

In a word, no. Without a doubt, libertarians should be happy that the Democrats’ power grabs have met with such vociferous opposition. Anything that can stop this dash toward dirigisme, or at least slow it down, is a good thing. Seldom has there been a better time to stand athwart history and yell “Stop!” So we should rejoice that at least some conservatives haven’t forgotten their signature move.

That, however, is about all the contemporary right is good for. It is capable of checking at least some of the left’s excesses, and thank goodness for that. But a clear-eyed look at conservatism as a whole reveals a political movement with no realistic potential for advancing individual freedom. The contemporary right is so deeply under the sway of its most illiberal impulses that they now define what it means to be a conservative.

What are those impulses?

First and foremost, a raving, anti-intellectual populism, as expressed by (among many, many others) Sarah Palin and Glenn Beck. Next, a brutish nationalism, as expressed in anti-immigrant xenophobia (most recently on display in Arizona) and it’s-always-1938-somewhere jingoism. And, less obvious now but always lurking in the background, a dogmatic religiosity, as expressed in homophobia, creationism, and extremism on beginning- and end-of-life issues. The combined result is a right-wing identity politics that feeds on the red meat of us versus them, “Real America” versus the liberal-dominated coasts, faith and gut instinct versus pointy-headed elitism.

This noxious stew of reaction and *ressentiment* is the antithesis of libertarianism. The spirit of freedom is cosmopolitan. It is committed to secularism in political discourse, whatever religious views people might hold privately. And it coolly upholds reason against the swirl of interests and passions. History is full of ironies and surprises, but there is no rational basis for expecting an outlook as benighted as the contemporary right’s to produce policy results that libertarians can cheer about.

Groupthink and Fever Dreams

Modern conservatism has always had an illiberal dark side. Recall the first great populist spasms of the postwar right—McCarthyism and opposition to desegregation—and recall as well that *National Review* founder William F. Buckley stoutly defended both. Any ideology dedicated to defending traditional ways of doing things is of necessity going to appeal to the reactionary as well as the prudently conservative. And since, going all the way back to Buckley's *God and Man at Yale*, the right's adversary was the nation's liberal intellectual elite, conservatism has always been vulnerable to the populist temptation.

But prior to the rise of the conservative counter-establishment—think tanks, talk radio, websites, and Fox News—the right's dark side was subject to a critical constraint: To be visible at all in the nation's public debate, conservatism was forced to rely on intellectual champions whose sheer brilliance and sophistication caused the liberal gatekeepers in mass media to deem them suitable for polite company. People such as Buckley, George Will, and Milton Friedman thus became the public face of conservative ideology, while the rabble-rousers and conspiracy theorists were consigned to the shadow world of mimeographs, pamphlets, and paperbacks that nobody ever reviewed. The handicap of elite hostility thereby conferred an unintended benefit: It gave conservatism a high-quality intellectual leadership that, to some extent at least, was able to curb the movement's baser instincts.

Now, however, the discipline of having to fight intellectual battles on the opponent's turf is long gone. Conservatism has turned inward, like the dog in the joke, because it can. The result is what **reason** Contributing Editor Julian Sanchez has called the movement's "epistemic closure." The quality of the right's intellectual leadership—the people who set the agenda, who define what "true" conservatism means at any given time—has consequently suffered a precipitous decline. What counts today isn't engaging the other side with reasoned arguments; it's building a rabid fan base by demonizing the other side and stoking the audience's collective sense of outrage and victimization. And that's a job best performed not by serious thinkers but by hacks and hucksters. Rush Limbaugh, Glenn Beck, Sean Hannity, Mark Levin, Joseph Farah, Ann Coulter, Michelle Malkin: they adorn the cathedral of conservatism like so many gargoyles.

Yes, there are still many bright and inquisitive minds on the right, but they are not the movement's stars and they don't call the shots. On the contrary, if they stray too far in challenging the conservative id, they find themselves cast out and castigated as heretics and RINOs (Republicans In Name Only). Bruce Bartlett and David Frum (who are friends of mine) are only two of the more prominent victims of that intolerant groupthink; both were sacked by conservative think tanks shortly after loudly expressing heterodox opinions.

As the worst get on top, they bring out the worst in their loyal followers. Goaded by the conservative message machine's toxic mix of intolerance and self-pity, mass opinion on the right has veered off into feverish self-delusion. Witness the "birther" phenomenon. According to Public Policy Polling, 63 percent of Republicans either believe Obama was born in a foreign country or aren't sure one way or the other. A more recent poll by the same outfit shows that 52 percent of Republicans believe that ACORN stole the 2008 election for Obama with voter fraud, while another 21 percent are undecided. This polling outfit is closely tied to the Democrats, so take the exact numbers with some grains of salt if

you wish. But it is beyond doubt that paranoia is rampant in right-wing circles these days.

The return of small-government rhetoric does not signal a break from the right's illiberal commitments. Rather, those same commitments are simply being expressed in a different way to suit the changing times. We're in the midst of a deep slump, and economic issues always come to the fore during tough times. Furthermore, Washington is now under Democratic control. When their own gang was in power, conservatives rallied "us" against a grab bag of "thems," most notably gays, Mexicans, and "Islamofascists" and their liberal "appeasers." Now the us-versus-them game has gotten much simpler. Barack Obama—Harvard-educated, left of center, the son of a foreigner, a suspected Muslim who (according to Palin) "pals around with terrorists"—pulls together all the hated "thems" in one convenient package. Opposing Obama and his agenda may sound libertarian, but it's also the perfect outlet for the same old distinctly anti-libertarian mix of populism, nationalism, and dogmatism.

Let's look in particular at the Tea Party movement, whose sudden rise is what has sparked all the talk of a fusionist revival. In April *The New York Times* published a detailed survey of Tea Party supporters, and the results are telling. First, this movement is definitely a right-wing phenomenon. Of those polled, 73 percent said they are somewhat or very conservative, 54 percent called themselves Republicans (compared to only 5 percent who confessed being Democrats), and 66 percent said they always or usually vote for the GOP candidate. When asked to give their opinions of various public figures, they gave favorable/unfavorable splits of 59/6 for Glenn Beck and 66/12 for Sarah Palin (though a plurality said the latter would not be an effective president). And in the single most depressing result of the whole poll, 57 percent of Tea Party supporters expressed a favorable opinion of the big-government president George W. Bush—as compared to Americans overall, 58 percent of whom gave Bush an *unfavorable* rating.

It should come as no surprise, then, that Tea Partiers hold distinctly unlibertarian views on a wide variety of issues. According to the *Times* poll, 82 percent think illegal immigration is a very serious problem, and supporters of decreasing legal immigration outnumber those who want to liberalize immigration by 42 to 14 percent. Only 16 percent favor gay marriage (compared to 39 percent of the country at large), and 40 percent call for no legal recognition of same-sex unions. Meanwhile, 77 percent support either banning abortions outright or making them more difficult to obtain.

But at least the Tea Partiers are dedicated to reining in government spending, right? After all, it's the movement's defining issue. Well, put me down as a skeptic. If you really care about restraining the growth of government, the number one priority has to be restructuring the budget-busting Medicare program. Yet during the health care debate the GOP sank to shameless demagoguery in defending Medicare's sanctity. The short-term goal was to score points against ObamaCare, but the most likely long-term effect was to make needed reforms even more difficult to achieve. And how did Tea Partiers, and movement conservatives generally, respond to this irresponsible pandering? They scarcely said boo.

Authoritarian and Unpopular

Notwithstanding the return of libertarian rhetoric, the right today is a fundamentally illiberal and authoritarian movement. It endorses the systematic use of torture. It defends unchecked presidential power over matters of national security. It excuses massive violations of Americans' civil liberties committed in the name of fighting terrorism. It supports bloated military budgets, preventive war, and open-ended, nation-building occupations. It calls for repressive immigration policies. Far from being anti-statist, it glorifies and romanticizes the agencies of government coercion: the police and the military. It opposes abortion rights. It opposes marriage equality. It panders to creationism. It routinely questions the patriotism of its opponents. It traffics in outlandish conspiracy theories. If you're serious about individual freedom and limited government, you cannot stand with this movement.

In any event, conservatism in its current incarnation looks like a political dead end. Its wildly overheated rhetoric, with cries of socialism and dark hints of impending dictatorship, alienates the moderate center of American public opinion even as it thrills the hardcore base. That base, meanwhile, is in long-term demographic decline. White, married, churchgoing, with kids—all those categories associated with a right-of-center orientation have been shrinking as a percent of the population, and all are expected to continue shrinking. In analyzing the impact of demographic change on the 2008 election, the journalist Ron Brownstein looked at six basic groups: whites with college degrees, whites without degrees, African-Americans, Hispanics, Asians, and other minorities. If each of those group's share of the electorate had remained unchanged since 1992, McCain would have beaten Obama by 2 percentage points instead of losing by 7.

At the same time, younger Americans have decisively repudiated the contemporary right's illiberal social values. The Pew Research Center's 2007 survey of Americans aged 18–25, dubbed "Generation Next," is illustrative. Pew's polling reveals that young adults are dramatically less religious and less nationalist than their elders. Twenty percent say they are not religious, compared to only 11 percent of Americans 26 or older. They favor evolution over creationism by a 63 to 33 margin. Supporters of gay marriage in this age group narrowly outnumber opponents (47 to 46 percent), while among everyone older opponents carry the day by a 64–30 spread. Among young adults, 52 percent say immigrants strengthen our country, while 38 percent say they are a burden; by contrast, Americans 26 and up embrace the anti-immigrant view by a 42–39 margin. In the rising generation, only 29 percent agree that "using overwhelming force is the best way to defeat terrorism," while 67 percent think that "relying too much on military force leads to hatred and more terrorism." Among Americans 26 and older, though, hawks beat doves 49 to 41. God-and-country populism may still appeal to a large number of Americans (though certainly not a majority), but its future looks bleak.

Back in the Cold War, when socialism remained a living ideal and totalitarianism was a leading force in world affairs, an anti-socialist alliance between libertarians and social conservatives may have made sense. It doesn't anymore.

Does that mean I think that libertarians should ally with the left instead? No, that's equally unappealing. I do believe that libertarian ideas are better expressed in the *language* of liberalism rather than that of conservatism. But it's clear enough that for now and the foreseeable future, the left is no more viable a home for libertarians than is the right.

The blunt truth is that people with libertarian sympathies are politically homeless. The best thing we can do is face up to that fact and act accordingly. That means taking the libertarian movement in a new direction: attempting to claim the center of American politics. If that move were successful, ideas of a distinctly libertarian cast would define the views of a critical swing constituency that politicians on the left and right would have to compete for.

Make no mistake, though: relocating to the center would make for a very different movement than the one we've got now. The organized libertarian movement began with the goal of offering a radical alternative to conservatism and liberalism. But ever since the main vehicle of that aspiration, the Libertarian Party, fizzled into irrelevance in the 1980s, the movement has tilted heavily to the right. However much individual libertarians like to think they transcend the left-right divide, the actual operating strategy of organized libertarianism has been fusionism.

In particular, a great deal of libertarian talent and energy has gone into building a "free market" movement of organizations that focus more or less exclusively on economic issues. These organizations include fundraising groups such as the Club for Growth, activist outfits such as FreedomWorks and Americans for Prosperity, legal shops such as the Institute for Justice, and state-level think tanks such as the Mackinac Center and the Goldwater Institute. By steering clear of social issues and foreign policy, the free-market movement has shunted aside the questions that divide libertarians from conservatives and instead institutionalized the ground they seem to share.

Expressly libertarian writers have spent much more time engaging conservative audiences than reaching out to liberals. They have written more frequently for right-wing outlets such as *National Review*, *The Washington Times*, and *The Wall Street Journal* than for their counterparts on the left. They have regularly identified with the Goldwater-Reagan current of conservatism, notwithstanding the profound differences between that strain and libertarian thinking on a number of fronts. And they have often couched libertarian arguments in conservative terms, venerating the timeless wisdom of America's founding principles while conveniently ignoring the fact that another set of founding principles included the enslavement of blacks, subjugation of women, and expropriation of Indian lands.

Declaring independence from the right would require big changes. Cooperation with the right on free-market causes would need to be supplemented by an equivalent level of cooperation with the left on personal freedom, civil liberties, and foreign policy issues. Funding for political candidates should be reserved for politicians whose commitment to individual freedom goes beyond economic issues. In the resources they deploy, the causes they support, the language they use, and the politicians they back, libertarians should be making the point that their differences with the right are every bit as important as their differences with the left.

The first step, though, is recognizing the problem. Right now, like it or not, the libertarian movement is a part of the vast right-wing conspiracy—a distinctive and dissident part, to be sure, but a part all the same. As a result, our ideals are being tainted and undermined

through guilt by association. It's time for libertarians to break ranks and stand on our own.

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The Non-Existent Center

Disparaging conservatives is no substitute for recognizing that only the right takes economic libertarianism seriously.

By Jonah Goldberg

Brink Lindsey is both brilliant and sensible. That's part of why I admire his work so much. But I must say I find those qualities largely missing in his case for Liberalitarianism 2.0.

Under Liberalitarianism 1.0, Lindsey endeavored to forge a new fusionism between liberals and libertarians. The old alliance between conservatives and libertarians was either ill-conceived from the outset or had reached the point of diminishing returns. An "honest survey of the past half-century shows a much better match between libertarian means and progressive ends," he famously wrote in December 2006 in *The New Republic* (the magazine that should be blamed for the un-euphonious moniker "libertarian," which, alas, has stuck). Lindsey proposed "a refashioned liberalism that incorporate[s] key libertarian concerns and insights" and "make[s] possible a truly progressive politics once again."

As flawed as I thought that project was, I wished Lindsey luck in at least some of his endeavors. While I think severing the fusionist bond with conservatism would be bad for libertarians, conservatives, and the country, at the same time I would like nothing more than to see libertarians convince liberals to become less statist and less culturally bullying. Moreover, his core point had much merit: The wealth and freedom created by libertarian policies are the best means toward "progressive" (at least in his benign use of the term) ends.

But that's all moot now because under Liberalitarianism 2.0, Lindsey doesn't call for a new "lib-lib" fusionism so much as a libertarian breakaway movement whereby libertarianism fashions itself as the "new center." This new move is apparently necessary because Lindsey has realized how inhospitable progressive soil is to the flower of libertarianism. Suffused with deference to planners, reverence for the state, and a predilection for running other peoples' lives, contemporary liberalism is largely (though not entirely) liberalism in name only.

Lindsey concedes this fact in an awkward way when he writes: "I do believe that libertarian ideas are better suited to the language of liberalism rather than that of conservatism." Which is another way of saying that liberals talk a good game about freedom, but their policies have nothing to do with it. Meanwhile, maybe Lindsey is right that the language of conservatism needs to be reinvigorated with libertarianism, but it seems to me that's exactly what the Tea Partiers he so disdains are busy doing.

Many of Lindsey's core assumptions about conservatism's relationship with libertarianism are just wrong. For starters, why should libertarianism be so hostile to culturally conservative values? Isn't libertarianism about freedom, including the freedom to live conservatively if that's what people choose? Secularism in politics is a perfectly admirable and libertarian value, but using the state to impose secularism on society is not. One gets the sense from Lindsey that the greater threat to freedom in this country comes from conservatives imposing their "benighted" religious outlook on the citizenry, rather than from the state scrubbing society of religion while imposing narrow conceptions of "diversity" on every institution and hamlet. Which worldview has more state and corporate power behind it in America today, Christianity or—for want of a better term—political correctness? Lindsey is supposed to be making the case for freedom, and yet so much of his uncharacteristically intemperate essay simply reads like he has chosen sides in the culture war and thinks that a host of political and policy questions should therefore be settled.

Not all of Lindsey's complaints about the right and the GOP are without merit, but there's so much ill-willed tendentiousness and ad hominem embedded in his description of political reality, it's hard not to conclude that his emotions have gotten the better of him. Again and again, Lindsey grabs the most convenient, negative, and often clichéd, interpretations of Tea Parties, "birthers," rightwing paranoia and the usual parade of horrors (sorry: "gargoyles") in order to make his case that libertarians need to divorce themselves from conservatives. Worse, he singles out sins of the right as if they are not also sins of the left—and libertarians as well. (I would submit that the distribution of "outlandish conspiracy theories" is fairly uniform across the ideological landscape.)

For instance, I was particularly sorry to see him buy into this "epistemic closure" nonsense. I'd strongly argue that he's simply wrong on the facts about David Frum's departure from the American Enterprise Institute. But even if he weren't, are we really to believe that the Cato Institute is more accommodating of heterodox ideas within the framework of libertarian thought? I would be curious to see how long a scholar at Cato would endure after coming out in favor of, say, socialized medicine. And pray tell, when said scholar was given the heave-ho, would Lindsey decry the "intolerant groupthink" that led to the decision? I wouldn't call that "epistemic closure," but I am at a loss as to why Lindsey wouldn't. As for Bruce Bartlett's wildly overplayed plight, it's at least worth noting that the think tank he was cut loose from could just as easily be described as libertarian as conservative. It's hardly as if the free-market National Center for Policy Analysis has ever been a bastion of social conservatism.

Lindsey's telling insinuation that the libertarian position is de facto pro-abortion rights would draw objections from those many people who describe themselves as pro-life libertarians. More practically, I think Lindsey misapprehends the "libertarianism" of actual American voters. Even if the majority of people who (accurately) describe themselves as libertarians favor legalized abortion, it is quite clearly not the case that most care about the issue very much. Meanwhile, a great many of the conservatives who are willing to vote for libertarians do care about it very much. I don't know what Brink Lindsey thinks of Ron and Rand Paul, but it is quite obvious that their political fortunes would be nil were they not pro-life. Either their popularity with conservative Republicans suggests that the right isn't nearly so hostile to libertarianism as Lindsey thinks or it means that the

Pauls have sold their souls to the party of Comstockish illiberalism.

There's real merit to Lindsey's claim that the "spirit of freedom is cosmopolitan." But today's champions of cosmopolitanism are hardly champions of freedom and devotees of the quintessentially cosmopolitan libertarian Albert J. Nock. Rather, they are the transnational progressive technocrats of Davos and the U.N. who, with increasing frequency, express contempt for democratic sovereignty because the people can't be trusted to handle such problems as climate change.

Lindsey makes a perfectly fine and correct observation that libertarians—at least true-blue ones—are politically homeless. But it's worth stressing that this is not the case where it actually matters most: economics.

I am perfectly willing to concede that the GOP's free-market record has been fraught and festooned with disappointments and betrayals. But at the intellectual level, even among most of the people Lindsey describes as "gargoyles," economic libertarianism remains largely synonymous with economic conservatism. The Mount Rushmore of libertarian economics—Hayek, Friedman, Mises, Hazlitt, et al—quite simply is the Mount Rushmore of conservative economics. Cato's economic prescriptions are respected by only one of the major political parties, and it's not the Democrats.

And yet, as a matter of practical politics, Lindsey would have libertarian spokesmen and advocates alienate conservatives in the hope that this would earn credibility with liberals. It seems far more likely that liberals would pocket libertarian attacks on the right—of the sort found in Lindsey's essay—while continuing to ignore libertarian arguments on economics and other key areas of public policy. Left-wing environmentalists will not suddenly embrace property rights because libertarians vilify the Christian Right. But the Christian Right may well stop listening to libertarians if they all started talking the way Lindsey does here.

Lastly, this talk of turning libertarianism into centrism is intriguing but no less ludicrous for it. Simply put, centrists aren't libertarians and libertarians aren't centrists. Ending the drug war is at the heart of contemporary libertarianism (and has long been the official position of the "benighted" National Review, by the way). But how does Lindsey plan on making that centrist? How will he make an open-borders immigration policy centrist? Social Security privatization? Free-market health care? I know Cato has invested heavily in arguing otherwise, but the reality is that centrists, just like almost everybody else, hold libertarian views on some issues and not on others. And many views held by libertarians simply are not centrist. Like it or not, in America, the more libertarian you are on most economic questions, the more "right wing" you are. Period. (But it is not always true that being libertarian on social issues makes you "left wing." Progressives embrace speech codes, racial quotas, state intrusions into the right of association, etc.)

If you take all of Lindsey's talk of being "centrist" and replace it with "popular," it clarifies his argument enormously. Basically, Lindsey wants full-blown libertarianism to be popular. I do too! But no amount of wordplay, poll-data-torturing, or bridge-burning will make this philosophy genuinely popular, never mind the new hinge for our two-party

system. This is not an argument, it's a wish.

Wishful thinking also lurks under his claim that the right is dying away. This is not only untrue as a matter of public opinion (as of this writing, polls show women, independents, etc. moving back to the GOP), but it's untrue as a matter of policy as well. One of the main reasons conservatives have emphasized their "illiberal" policies on such issues as national security and abortion is that they are popular (even, dare I say it, centrist). Nowhere does Lindsey provide evidence that support for, say, military tribunals is unpopular, because he can't. The Obama administration has been learning this lesson the hard way. In fact, both parties have emphasized their more illiberal facades in recent years. Nonetheless, I would still dispute that the GOP is less libertarian today than it was, say, at the beginning of Bush's first term, when the libertarian-rebuking "compassionate conservatism" was all the rage.

I wish Lindsey had spent a lot less time disparaging conservatives and aping the punditry of The New York Times and more time concentrating on the philosophical argument behind Liberalitarianism 2.0. It's a fascinating topic with many avenues for agreement and disagreement. Personally, I think he has it wrong in his attitudes toward religion and social conservatism. From the founding, religion was a great engine for liberty. Our constitutional order rests on the conviction that we are endowed by our creator with certain rights. Both the abolitionist and civil rights movements were religious in nature.

As for social conservatism, I think the real way to deal with Lindsey's disdain for it is to pursue a more plausible and principled solution to the problems affecting both libertarianism and the country: federalism. As Thomas Jefferson knew, big cities will always be cosmopolitan. But there's no reason why one narrow definition of cosmopolitanism needs to be imposed across the land. Social conservatives and libertine libertarians—and some practical progressives—should be able to find common cause in a campaign that allows people to live the way they want to live in communities that reflect their values. But that is a subject for another day and, hopefully, Liberalitarianism 3.0.

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Drink Your Tea

How could you not celebrate the spontaneous emergence of a decentralized movement aimed at rolling back big government?

By Matt Kibbe

I can't help but wonder what planet Brink Lindsey has been living on for the last 18 months. Lindsey's harangue against the good men and women who make up the Tea Party movement—utterly dismissive of their important work against an entrenched political establishment—seems disconnected from reality. This massive grassroots revolt against big government is the greatest opportunity that advocates of limited government have

seen in generations, yet libertarian intellectuals like Lindsey seem content to sit on the sidelines and nitpick. While the Tea Party builds a whole new infrastructure to house a massive community organized in defense of individual liberty and constitutionally constrained government, Lindsey would rather quibble over the color palette of the wall tiles in the guest bathroom.

His attitude is too typical, I fear. Lindsey views the world from the rarified vantage point of someone perched in a perfectly calibrated, climate-controlled Ivory Tower. From that high up he can't possibly see what is actually happening on the ground.

Casually confusing the terms "conservative," "Republican," and "Tea Party," Lindsey borrows liberally from the left's caricature of knuckle-draggers to knock down one strawman at a time. He's made a hash of the whole thing, but I'll just make a few observations from the vantage point of someone who, as part of FreedomWorks, has been working with the Tea Party movement from its inception.

Lindsey grants some value in our opposition to government-run health care, allowing that "at least some conservatives haven't forgotten their signature move" as the Loyal Opposition to the Democrats' wild expansion of government. But where was he when this movement was being born out of principled disgust with Republican spending, with the corruption of earmarks as a source of campaign financing, and most notably in opposition to the TARP bailout? What is now called the Tea Party was forged during the first bailout, when angry citizens actually killed the first TARP proposal on the House floor by standing up and pushing back against a Republican president. We all could have used more help then, before the bill became law, opposing the most outrageous expansion of government power in my lifetime. That genie's not going back in the bottle. When it mattered most, many think tank intellectuals were scarcely seen or heard from.

Lindsey says that true libertarianism is far more "cosmopolitan" than the rabble-rousers he sees on the streets. That sounds more than a bit like a certain president I could name, a guy who wants America to be more like Europe. Lindsey even ridicules those of us who venerate "the timeless wisdom of America's founding principles." I for one hope we maintain our difference from Europe in continuing to live by the radical principles of individual rights and limits on collective government power. Is that trite? If so, I got my triteness from a guy named Howard Roark: "Our country, the noblest country in the history of men, was based on the principle of individualism, the principle of man's 'inalienable rights.' It was a country where a man was free to seek his own happiness, to gain and produce, not to give up and renounce; to prosper, not to starve; to achieve, not to plunder; to hold as his highest possession a sense of his personal value, and as his highest virtue his self-respect."

Call me provincial, but I always loved that speech. I suppose fictional characters are not serious intellectual leaders, though.

But who is, exactly? Practicing conservatism in the worst sense of the term, Lindsey pines for the days prior to the Internet and talk radio when network oligarchs and taxpayer-funded television forced the right to rely on a few "intellectual champions" of "sheer

brilliance” who covered for the inelegance of the unwashed masses behind them.

Today, Lindsey worries, serious intellectuals “don’t call the shots.” The best of the bunch, like his friends Bruce Bartlett and David Frum, have been sacked by the enforcers of “intolerant groupthink.” Bartlett, a former Reagan official, is quite popular these days in the White House and on the left because of his vocal support for a value added tax, which he defends on grounds that “the U.S. needs a money machine” to fund the spending requirements of big government. Frum, a former speechwriter for President George W. Bush, was particularly outraged by the recent vanquishing of the “perfectly good” conservative Sen. Robert Bennett (R-Utah) by the Tea Party hordes. Anticipating Bennett’s defeat, state GOP delegates, mostly new to the political process, chanted “TARP, TARP, TARP!” from the convention floor. The now-lame duck senator had unapologetically voted for the Wall Street bailout, aggressively defended Senate appropriators’ culture of earmarks, and introduced health care reform legislation requiring that all Americans buy government-approved health insurance.

It may be intolerant to say so, but these are all intolerable policy ideas, and the Tea Party movement isn’t tolerating them.

Down here on terra firma, things look dramatically different from what Lindsey so dislikes. From my perspective, the Tea Party movement is a beautiful chaos, or as F.A. Hayek would put it, a spontaneous order. Ours is a leaderless, decentralized grassroots movement made up of people who believe in freedom, in the government not spending money it does not have, and in the specialness of our constitutional republic. They have arisen from their couches and kitchen tables and self-organized a potent countervailing force to the cozy collusion of political expediency, big government, and special interests.

One of the virtues of this decentralized world today is that citizens are no longer dependent on old-school institutions such as Congress, television networks, and even think tanks for information and good ideas. Like the Tea Party movement itself, access to information is completely decentralized by infinite sources online. Like the discovery process that determines prices in unfettered markets, these informal networks take advantage of what the philosopher Michael Polanyi called “personal knowledge.” Bloggers and citizen activists on the Internet now gather these bits of knowledge and serve as the clearinghouse for the veracity of facts and the salience of good ideas.

Do Tea Partiers read? You bet they do, and with a focus and discipline fitting a peoples’ paradigm shift away from big-government conservatism. One woman who marched in D.C. on September 12, 2009, had draped a big white banner, almost as big as she was, over the crowd control barricade. It stated, succinctly: “Read Thomas Sowell.” They listen to Glenn Beck and study Saul Alinsky. They also read Rand, Friedman, and Mises. They even read the Constitution of the United States, as timeless as it is, risking the erudite wrath of their cosmopolitan betters.

The Tea Party movement, if sustained, has the potential to take America back from an entrenched establishment of big spenders, political careerists, and rent-seeking corporations. The values that animate us all—lower taxes, less government, and more

freedom—is a big philosophical tent set at the very center of American politics.

Brink, you should come on down and join us. You might get your hands dirty, but the good people of the Tea Party could sure use the help.

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