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The Purge at Cato

September 2nd, 2010 at 2:27 pm [David Frum](#) | [10 Comments](#) |

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The summer's biggest inside-Washington story was the abrupt and simultaneous departure of co-authors Brink Lindsey and Will Wilkinson from the Cato Institute.

Lindsey was Cato's vice president for research; Wilkinson a Cato scholar. They were working together on a book arguing for a new political approach fusing libertarianism and liberalism – a concept that Cato has previously endorsed on issues like drug control, foreign policy, and sexual freedom.

Lindsey and Wilkinson missed the memo announcing that Cato was going all-in with the Tea Party movement. In early July, Lindsey negatively [reviewed](#) at the liberal *American Prospect* website a new book by American Enterprise Institute president, Arthur Brooks. Brooks had provided an intellectual manifesto for the Tea Party, arguing that the United States now faced a culture-dividing battle over the continued existence of the free enterprise system. Lindsey's view: "The attempt to turn economic policy disputes into a populist cultural crusade rests on deep-seated confusion about the nature of those disputes and how best to effect constructive policy change."

A few days later, Lindsey – whoosh! – abruptly departed to a new job at the Kauffman Foundation, Wilkinson to a part-time blog at the *Economist*.

The story bubbled among libertarian bloggers and tweeters. It broke into the larger blog conversation last week, when Dave Weigel [asked](#) the obvious question: were Lindsey and Wilkinson purged?

[Y]ou have to struggle not to see a political context to this. Lindsey and Wilkinson are among the Cato scholars who most often find common cause with liberals. In 2006, after the GOP lost Congress, Lindsey coined the term “Liberalarians” to suggest that libertarians and liberals could work together outside of the conservative movement. Shortly after this, he launched a dinner series where liberals and libertarians met to discuss big ideas. (Disclosure: I attended some of these dinners.) In 2009 and 2010, as the libertarian movement moved back into the right’s fold, Lindsey remained iconoclastic. Just last month he penned a rare, biting criticism of *The Battle*, a book by AEI President Arthur Brooks

Granted: people are terminated by Washington think tanks all the time, for a gamut of normal employer-employee reasons. Not news. But over recent years, we have seen a series of high-profile terminations from right-of-center think tanks for reasons that are anything but normal. Lindsey’s and Wilkinson’s apparent terminations are perhaps the most shocking and ominous to date.

First, let me say at the outset that I have known Brink for a quarter century, since our days at the Harvard Law School chapter of the Federalist society back in the mid-1980s. I have zero doubt that Lindsey and Wilkinson were terminated. They are not talking, but they are not denying either, as you would expect them to do. I am led to my belief not only by the suggestive timing, but also by Cato’s revealing statements about the departure.

Here’s Ed Crane in an internal email:

Catoites,

As you may by now have heard, our longtime colleague and friend Brink Lindsey has accepted a senior position at the Kansas City-based Kauffman Foundation. He will be a senior fellow in research and policy. The good news is that he will be working here in Washington with, among others, our old friend Bob Litan (formerly with Brookings). Brink has made many meaningful contributions to Cato over the nearly two decades he has worked here, not least of which include the establishment of our Center for Trade Policy Studies and our online Cato Unbound. This looks to be a terrific opportunity for Brink. Please join me in thanking him for his contributions to Cato and wishing him well in his new endeavor.

As Crane says, Lindsey had worked at Cato for almost 20 years. You’d think there might be a cocktail reception for him on his way out the door? Maybe some speeches, tributes, thanks? But no. Just a through-gritted-teeth emailed appreciation of Lindsey’s “meaningful” contributions. This is not how Washington think tanks bid farewell to their vice presidents. It looks very much instead as if Lindsey was shoved. Thanks to his own prominence and intellectual value, Lindsey was quickly snapped up by a rising competitor. Which is good news for him and his family – but does not at all correct the ugly message of the termination for the larger right-of-center world.

Obviously nobody has a right to be employed at a think tank. Inescapably, think tanks must pick and choose among many potential scholars and fellows. The people who donate money to think tanks have every right to expect those institutions to use donated funds to advance stated values and principles.

At the same time, think tanks are supposed to adhere to intellectual norms and standards. Supposedly there exists some difference between a think tank and, say, a PR agency, which will say whatever it is paid to say.

Yet as with the notorious [firing](#) of Bruce Bartlett from the National Center for Policy Analysis in 2003 after his [book](#) critical of President George W. Bush; as with my own termination at the American Enterprise Institute in March; the Lindsey-Wilkinson apparent termination raises very troubling questions about what has happened to the right-of-center think-tank enterprise.

Consider this:

The leading right-of-center student of healthcare policy in the whole country is Mark McClellan. McClellan taught at Stanford in the 1990s. He came to the American Enterprise Institute in 2000. He was hired into government by President Bush, rose to head the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services. He left government in 2006 to write and think. Did he return to AEI? He did not. He went to Brookings. Why?

The question might be magnified. It's very sobering to review the work produced by the leading Washington conservative think tanks over the past 5 years, and compare it to the work of prior periods. Even more sobering to review the work produced over the past 2 years. You might say that there has been much more "tank" than "think" – that these institutions have been acting not as the Harvards of the right, but as the armored fighting vehicles of the policy world.

Until now, you could hold some hope that things would soon improve. In Bartlett's case, at least, the think tank was at least small and thinly financed. One could hope that the big and wealthy institutions of Washington could afford more independence.

In my case, the institution seems to have acted impulsively at a moment of high emotion, the immediate aftermath of President Obama's healthcare victory. One could hope that in more normal times, independent thought would have more leeway.

But in the Lindsey-Wilkinson case, we confront the problem of the closing of the conservative mind in its purest form. Unlike NCPA, Cato is not a marginal institution. Unlike AEI's action with me, Cato's apparent termination of Lindsey and Wilkinson seems the result of a considered strategic decision.

It might be objected that Cato and the others have no choice. The waters are surging in the conservative world, and conservative institutions must either ride the wave or be swamped. But if wave-riding is all that these very expensive institutions are doing, who needs them?

Right-of-center think tanks claim to do objective research that can be trusted by all policy players, regardless of point of view. They boast that they care about ideas, not parties or personalities. They aspire to set a broader agenda for the right, in lieu of the narrow demands of K Street special interests.

These claims look increasingly false. The right-of-center world is poorer for the dessication of the institutions that used to act as the right's brains.

We are likely soon to have a Republican majority in the House of Representatives, maybe the U.S. Senate too. And what will that majority do? The answer seems to be: They have not a clue. Unlike the Republican House and Senate majorities of 1994, unlike the Republican Senate majority of 1980, these new majorities will arrive with only slogans for a policy agenda. After staging a for-the-record vote against Obamacare, and after re-enacting the Bush tax cuts, it will be policy mission accomplished.

There's little other policy inventory, because the think tanks have not done their proper work. Without a think tank agenda, the new majority will rapidly decline into a brokerage service for K Street.

After the GOP lost its majority in 2006, a leading think tanker said to me: "Somehow I always thought we'd get more done before we became completely corrupt." How much will we get done next time given the poverty of our think tank work over the past half decade? And how can we expect better work from institutions that have so emphatically warned their employees that an unwanted answer can end a career?

The losers here are not Brink Lindsey (who has moved to a fine new position) or Will Wilkinson (whose personal future is more unsettled, but whose talents will surely also be recognized). The loser is a conservative political movement waiting at the end of the intellectual conveyor belt for a product that increasingly arrives so shoddy and defective that it might as well not come at all.

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10 Comments so far ↓

- **Fairy Hardcastle** // [Sep 2, 2010 at 2:40 pm](#)

Mr. Frum, I think it is awfully hard to know what a future Congress and its leaders will do when its very leaders are in flux. Do you have some particular skill in reading the future or people's minds?

Is this sour grapes or what? Are you taking a line out of Rush Limbaugh's book and saying "I hope the new GOP fails?"

You seem to think that think tanks are required for good governance. Look where that got us. We elect representatives to decide for themselves not rely on K Street. Something tells me Miller won't need a think tank. Maybe in fact he will actually read proposed legislation.

- **Elvis Elvisberg** // [Sep 2, 2010 at 2:47 pm](#)

All fiscal conservatives left the GOP by 2004 because of Medicare Part D, two unfunded wars, and transparently unaffordable tax policies. All the small-government conservatives left the party by then too in the wake of No Child Left Behind, Ashcroft's anti-federalist War on Porn and on people complying with state laws that he didn't like, and the government's assertion of the power to detain American citizens indefinitely without trial and to wiretap citizens without warrants. All foreign policy conservatives left the GOP by 2006, as it became obvious that we had been misled into an incompetently prosecuted, catastrophic war. (Or at the very, very least that [every Republican in Congress](#) would admit that the invasion was a mistake).

There is no policy content to conservatism. It is a tribe, not an ideology.

The only core beliefs of conservatism are "Obama's a towelhead" and "liberals are f@gs."

The [Cato Institute is pleased to abandon libertarianism](#) when ideals conflict with their tribal impulses/donors' financial interests. It is pleased to have zero political influence on social policy while testifying before committees about any proposal that will permit its funders to enrich themselves at the expense of the public interest. These purges are terrible for the conservative movement and terrible for America, but it's where we are. This is what tribes do to people like Piggy.

- **DeepSouthPopulist** // [Sep 2, 2010 at 2:49 pm](#)

A very good move for Cato.

I remember Brink Lindsey's nasty screed from a couple of months back attacking Tea Party conservatives, linking them to the John Birch Society and other nasty groups, and accusing them of racism (what else?).

Based on that essay, Lindsey struck me as a very intelligent but embittered man who can't stand it that Rush Limbaugh is a household name sitting on top of a billion dollars while no one has ever heard of Brink