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Shattering the myth of a Left- libertarian alliance

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The resistance to President Obama's policy agenda has many moving parts, and this week we got a peek at the kinks in that machine, thanks to the abrupt departures of two policy wonks from the Cato Institute, the beating heart of Beltway libertarianism.

Brink Lindsey, a vice president at Cato and the evangelist of a libertarian-liberal coalition, was driven from the think tank, and he was followed out the door by his astute lieutenant, Will Wilkinson. It seems like inside baseball, but the moves reflect some telling facts about the free-market movement, the Republican Party, and the mainstream media's clueless attempts to "cover the Right."



(AP File)

The liberal media's verdict was predictable: Free-marketeers are so intolerant that any overtures to the Left are excommunicable offenses. This talking point is self-serving, but not entirely wrong. Still, it ignores two important truths about the current political scene.

First, Obama's unprecedented and breathtaking expansion of federal control over the economy, and his continuation of military interventionism and Dick Cheney-era detention and interrogation policies, has made it clear that this administration is openly hostile to the libertarian agenda. In brief: Lindsey's "liberal-tarianism," as he calls it, was buried by Obama.

Second, because of the media's overwhelming leftward bias, anyone "on the Right" who scuffles with the Right earns plaudits as a bold dissident - regardless of the facts.

Lindsey's project - building political alliances between libertarians and liberals - is (or was) a bold one, and not impossible in theory. Cato and the Left generally agree on constraining federal surveillance powers, reforming detention of terror suspects, and humanizing our criminal justice system. Gay marriage, abortion, and embryo research also provide common ground. Lindsey coined "liberal-tarian" in 2006, and many Beltway libertarians vocally supported Obama in 2008.

But then Obama's presidency happened. Obama immediately passed the largest spending bill in history,

and then he fired an aide who was trying to close Guantanamo.

He nationalized General Motors and stuck his hands into Chrysler's bankruptcy while escalating the war in Afghanistan. Obama required every American to buy health insurance and increased government control over health care. He's increased federal control over finance, mortgages, tobacco and food while fighting to get his hands on political speech, energy, and manufacturing. Obama is the greatest enemy of economic liberty most Americans have ever seen.

The Democratic House and Senate are just as strident in advancing state power. And the rhetoric from Democratic politicians and the liberal punditocracy oozes with disdain for the free-market cause, which Paul Krugman, Chuck Schumer, and their ilk vilify as dishonest shilling for corporate interests.

So liberal-tarianism - it's not working out so well.

That's certainly part of why Cato higher-ups were done buying what Lindsey was selling. But the liberal spin on the breakup struck some libertarians as true - and that's cause for concern politically.

Libertarian donors tend to be small-businessmen, and when they look at the nation's increasing debt, regulation and taxes, they begin to see Obama as the devil.

Obama's excesses are making free-marketeers more partisan. The same entrepreneurs who two years ago cursed Republican overspending and Bush bailouts are now asking one question: How can we drive Obama, Pelosi and Reid from power?

In such an environment, ambiguity about Obama - maybe he's not the devil - comes across as lukewarmness for liberty. This is a problem, because it means Republicans - no heroes on limiting government - could get a free pass from donors and activists.

Finally, there's the media myth: Lindsey will be portrayed as a martyr, excommunicated for his heresies from the Right's dogma. In this role, he joins neoconservative writer David Frum, who was driven from the American Enterprise Institute after praising Obamacare.

Lindsey and Frum followed parallel paths. In 2002 and 2003, Lindsey - contra most libertarians - prominently beat the drums for invading Iraq. Meanwhile, Frum played the conservatives' Robespierre, trying to purge from the Right those who opposed the invasion, whom he slurred as "unpatriotic conservatives."

Lindsey, when he admitted in 2006 that invading Iraq was a mistake, still billed himself as "extremely controversial" and open-minded in the face of dogma. Frum, today, basks in the Left's praise as an independent thinker. But Lindsey and Frum, in backing Bush's invasion then and supporting Obama now, were the opposite of dissidents: They consistently supported those in power who were fighting for more power.

This pattern doesn't make Lindsey or Frum sycophants, but it undermines their claim to be dissidents.

Washington personnel moves are hardly the stuff of headlines, but this one exposes some dysfunctions, fears, and myths that will guide politics over the next two years.

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