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Q&A with Jeffrey A. Miron

By Kris Kitto - 06/01/10 07:25 PM ET

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Harvard University professor and Cato Institute Senior Fellow Jeffrey A. Miron has provided nearly everything there is to know about libertarianism in his new book, *Libertarianism, from A to Z*. In an interview with The Hill, he talked about the Tea Party movement, common misunderstandings of libertarians and his interest in drug policy.

Q: Why did you decide to write this book?



Partially because I had done a lot of the work developing an economics course at Harvard, but also I felt there was a need for a calm, clear, consistent explanation of libertarianism, particularly what I call consequential libertarianism.

I think there is a lot of misinformation or confusion about what exactly

libertarianism means, and I don't think anything [previously] was presented the way I wanted it presented or that there was anything that I thought was up to date.

I also liked the idea [of] presenting it in this dictionary format.

Q: How did you become a libertarian?

My libertarianism is a consequential approach, which recognizes that attempts to make things better can have unintended consequences.

My father was an influence. He was a lawyer. He had libertarian instincts. We debated over the dinner table all the time.

I had the opportunity to teach at Harvard and to present a libertarian view over a broad range of topics. The more I did it, the more I thought that there was a consistent case for a broad set of libertarian views.

It also came out of studying drug policy and seeing that the arguments for why drugs should be legal should apply as easily to having guns be legal.

Q: How did you get interested in drug policy?

I was doing a sabbatical at a place called the National Bureau of Economic Research in Cambridge [Mass.], and people there were thinking of starting a bureau project on the economics on drugs. That just prompted me to think, "Why do we have some things that are legal and other things that aren't legal?"

Q: If you were writing the book today, where would the Tea Party fit in?

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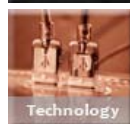
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I would say at this point, we don't quite know the impact it's going to have, because I think it has both conservative and libertarian elements, and the Tea Party really hasn't had to pick that lane yet, because the voter frustration that the Tea Party is responding to is mainly economic.

I would say they would have a harder time getting support once we get past 2010. I think they're going to have to pick which lane they want to be in. So far they're in the right place at the right time.

Q: Why do you think your class is popular with college students?

I think it's about things that are sort of fun and interesting to discuss. They're thinking about things which are in the news and which are not particularly technical. And I think a lot of students found that, in a lot of economics classes, you're presented with a model, and how it's going to fix the problem, but you don't talk through how things are going to act in the world.

I think they just found it refreshing to, for one, be equally skeptical of liberal and conservative policy solutions, and I think they liked the idea of attacking all the problems in a calm, systematic way, rather than sort of the rhetoric and assertions of the emotional presentations in the political arena.

Q: What do you think is the most common misunderstanding about libertarianism?

One misunderstanding is that libertarians are against all forms of government. That's absolutely not at all the case.

Another is that libertarians are geeky nerds with pocket protectors, and I think that there's a broad array of people who have sympathy for the libertarian outlook.

Libertarians are not all anti-religion. They're not all gun-toting. They're not all drug-using.

The single most harmful misperception from our perspective is that it gets lumped into conservatism, and that certainly is not true.

Q: Do you see your point of view represented at all in Congress?

A significant fraction of my point of view is represented by [Rep.] Ron Paul [R-Texas]. [Former Independent Minnesota Gov.] Jesse Ventura certainly had a lot of good libertarian instincts. Gary Johnson, the former governor of New Mexico, though he's officially a Republican. Full disclosure: I've done a little bit of advising for Gary Johnson. He's the one person I've ever met amongst people who've had any prayer of holding higher office that I could support enthusiastically.

Q: What do you think of Congress's attempt at Wall Street reform?

I think that they're a combination of things that will be ineffective and counterproductive. It's a messy issue, in part because we already have so much regulation, and we already have a system that doesn't work the way we like it to. It's very awkward to say we should do nothing.

Q: How would you have characterized your political thought before you became libertarian?

Growing up, my family were definitely Democrats, so I certainly had that perspective, but economics were kind of a fly in the ointment. The more I learned economics, the more it was harder to feel entirely comfortable with some liberal policies.

Q: What do you see in the future for libertarian thought and politics?

I think it has a future, but it's going to be a gradual future, and it's going to be a difficult future because I think it's human nature to want to fix things, to want

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to look for a solution, to want to make things better. The libertarian perspective sounds kind of depressing – yes, it's true the market is terrible, but the government is worse, so we just have to choose the lesser of two evils.

In the political arena, it's not easy to sell that. It's not easy for politicians to say, "Here's my proposal. It's not great, but it's better than the other guy's." That's not going to get you elected.

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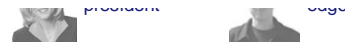
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