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"Brain-dead Conservatives:" More free-market scholars today than ever before

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“The heart and soul of conservatism is libertarianism,” Ronald Reagan said on many occasions, including a speech at Vanderbilt University when I was an undergraduate.

I’m not so sure. But at least the conservatism of Sen. Robert Taft, Sen. Barry Goldwater, and Reagan stood for a limited constitutional government in opposition to the federal aggrandizement of the New Deal and the Great Society. Back in the FDR-JFK-LBJ years, conservatives even stood for congressional government and against the imperial presidency.

But what does conservatism stand for today, other than opposition to President Obama? President Bush expanded entitlements, increased federal spending by more than a trillion dollars, federalized education, launched “nation-building” projects in two far-flung regions, and accumulated more power in the White House than any previous president.

Yet the masses assembled at the Conservative Political Action Conference chanted “Four More Years!” at him in the eighth year of his reign. Is that really a record that conservatives wanted more of?

Steven F. Hayward suggests in today's edition of [The Washinton Post](#) that one reason for conservatism’s having gotten off track, one that I’ve heard from other, mostly older, conservatives: A movement once led by William F. Buckley Jr., Russell Kirk, and Milton Friedman now gets its intellectual direction from talk show hosts and bloggers. Where are the tomes of yesteryear?

Well, it’s a fast-paced, market-driven world. If celebrities and rabble-rousing are what sell, then we’d better hope for some smart ideas on the airwaves. And it’s not like conservatives are alone in this trend.

Buckley jousted with John Kenneth Galbraith and Arthur Schlesinger Jr. Bill O’Reilly and Ann Coulter face off with Keith Olbermann and Michael Moore. Six years ago the Boston Globe noted that liberal books were, at least briefly, dominating the New York Times bestseller list.

Along with Hillary Clinton’s autobiography, those books were "Lies (and the Lying Liars Who Tell Them)," "Big Lies," "Thieves in High Places," and "Stupid White Men." Not exactly a sign of the intellectual depth of American liberalism.

The good news about the Obama era is that the president has returned the issue of the size, scope, and power of the federal government to center stage. And that in turn has revived the long-dormant small-government spirit in American conservatism.

In that regard, I'm more positive than Hayward is about the "tea party" movement. True, it is somewhat "unfocused," without a clear "connection to a concrete ideology." But it reflects and galvanizes the natural American antipathy to big government.

Now the responsibility of the conservative media and political leaders is to give the tea partiers a positive cause to rally around, by shining light on scholars with good ideas. There are plenty of free-market intellectuals today, far more than in the era when Milton Friedman dined alone. Glenn Beck does indeed sometimes devote significant time to a single intellectual; other talk show hosts should do the same.

Conservatives often prefer the prudent and cautious spirit of Edmund Burke and F. A. Hayek to the more libertarian and "progressive" vision of Thomas Jefferson. But neither Burke nor Hayek believed simply in standing athwart history, crying "Stop!"

Burke, after all, was a Whig, not a Tory, and a supporter of the American Revolution. And Hayek insisted that he was not a conservative:

"Conservatism, though a necessary element in any stable society, is not a social program; in its paternalistic, nationalistic and power-adoring tendencies it is often closer to socialism than true liberalism; and with its traditionalistic, anti-intellectual, and often mystical propensities it will never, except in short periods of disillusionment, appeal to the young and all those others who believe that some changes are desirable if this world is to become a better place."

He called himself a liberal, and he thought that Margaret Thatcher, with her vigorous program of free-market reform, was also a liberal. By whatever name, modern American conservatives would do well to take to heart Hayek's rallying cry:

"We must make the building of a free society once more an intellectual adventure, a deed of courage. What we lack is &hellip a truly liberal radicalism which does not spare the susceptibilities of the mighty &hellipwhich does not confine itself to what appears today as politically possible."

The trick for 21st-century American conservatives, conservatives in a country founded in libertarian revolution, is to decide which traditions are worth holding on to. I would suggest as a good first rule that we allow the natural evolution of society and market, while limiting coercive intervention into those processes.

Conservatism should make its peace with natural social change, before it loses the entire younger generation, while reaffirming its commitment to freedom and limited government.

David Boaz is executive vice president of the Cato Institute and author of "Libertarianism: A Primer."

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