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In Defense of Libertarianism

An open letter to left-liberals

Terry Michael | May 28, 2010

To my left-liberal Democrat friends:

As you engage in intellectual dishonesty using Rand Paul's silly comments on the 1964 Civil Rights Act to misrepresent libertarianism, perhaps you might want to consider a little history of the political philosophy of the founder of our party, Thomas Jefferson, the original libertarian. Let me help you escape your ignorance about libertarianism without a capital *L*, a political philosophy far from conservatism.

As a child of the 1960s, I was one of you. I wore a "Madly for Adlai" button, delivered Kennedy brochures on my newspaper route, and defended Medicare in speech class. Growing up in the Bible Belt, I was the only kid in town to subscribe to the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, a near-communist rag according to neighbors who read the *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, for which a young Pat Buchanan was writing editorials.

After three years of reporting, I became a press secretary, arriving in Washington in 1975 with Rep. Paul Simon who embodied the Progressive Era. He believed programs, regulations, and social "science" expertise could lift the poor and end corruption.

By the mid-1980s, I was press spokesman for the Democratic National Committee, when "centrist" Democrats began to repair the damage that led "Reagan Democrats" to desert the party. I joined other "New Democrats," rejecting tax-and-spend excess and the group-outcomes mentality that advocated preferences based on race rather than focusing on individual opportunity.

Then, by the middle of the 1990s, I made the logical progression to libertarian.

My own evolution might help inform those of you who think

libertarians are a bunch of self-centered, conservative, anti-poor ogres—unless, like some liberals in the cable babble and op-ed page commentariat, you wish to willfully mischaracterize the word *libertarian* and use the philosophy as a whipping boy. I'm talking to you, Joe Klein of *Time* magazine, who wrote that “Tea Party libertarians” would “expose the utopian foolishness of their ideology.” And you, Eugene Robinson of *The Washington Post*, who informed readers that “Paul lives in Libertarian La-La Land, where a purist philosophy leads people to believe in the purest nonsense.” Surely, Mr. Robinson, you know the difference between capital *L* Libertarian Party members, and those of us who are members of the two major parties, or of no party at all. The Tea Party is not a libertarian movement. It's a hodgepodge of populist beliefs, like those always accompanying economic downturns.

Classical liberalism, on the other hand, has lasted centuries. It was a natural fit for an Agrarian Era, with self-sustaining farmers, frontiersmen, and shop keepers. When the Industrial Era arrived, these individualists railed against “wage labor.” They wanted no part of centralized industry and its abuses. Corporate excesses fed Progressive Era reformers, who promoted one-size-fits-all government to address the sins of the Robber Barons.

With adoption of the income tax and world wars, a depression, and a big tax-paying middle class after World War II, Big Government was in full bloom by the 1960s, complete with a tax-hungry Cold War military industrial complex, entitlement programs that devoured revenue, and government dependency by both an impoverished underclass and a corporate welfare class.

Then came the push-back that brought Ronald Reagan to power. With about twice as many Americans calling themselves conservative as liberal, Democrats abandoned *liberal* and used the wimpy mush-word *progressive*.

Concurrent with abandonment of the New Deal and Great Society by large blocks of voters, there arrived the third great economic wave, the Information Age, which intellectually empowers individuals, allowing them to enjoy more control over their own economic lives.

If you made it this far, left-liberal friends, you'll see why many of us consider you reactionary when it comes to one-size-fits-all government. But we know you make common cause with us on cultural concerns like gay rights, and you share our non-interventionist views on foreign policy—though many of you avert your eyes as Barack

Obama places young men and women in harm's way in Afghanistan.

Of course, Rand Paul was ridiculous questioning four-decade-old settled law that recognized slavery and segregation as conditions justifying the coercive power of the state to prohibit discrimination. We libertarians could give you a long list of things, like fighting crime and enforcing contracts, we regard as appropriate for state intrusion. We just insist the use of government power be minimal, consistent with individual liberty and responsibility.

If you want a short explanation of a what a libertarian really is, here's one from a self-described "libertarian Democrat" who used to be one of you: Get the government out of my bank account, out of my bedroom, away from my body, and out of the backyards of the rest of the world (we should lead by example, not military force.)

And now, please have enough intellectual honesty—which Rand Paul had to a fault—to call yourselves liberals, instead of hiding behind that bullshit progressive euphemism!

Terry Michael is director of the Washington Center for Politics & Journalism, which he founded in 1988 to teach journalism students about politics. His writing is collected at "thoughts from a libertarian Democrat."