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The Cowardice of the Conservative

by Scott McPherson

Conservatives are an interesting bunch. In a desperate attempt to differentiate themselves from liberals, they like to mock folks on the Left while talking as if they themselves were in agreement with libertarians. “I just vote Republican because they’re the lesser of two evils” is a common excuse for their continued support of that party and its philosophy (for lack of a better word).

But when you scratch below the surface of the typical conservative you find someone whose principles are about as far from libertarian as the leftist principles he condemns. As a friend of mine once said, “Conservatives like to talk about ‘limited government’ — they just never say what they want it limited to.”

In short, conservatives are typically cowards who don’t have the courage of their alleged convictions.

For example, take the issue of immigration, a hot topic this election year for Republicans. Unable to stand on principle against big government, most conservatives have decided instead to pick on an easy target, one guaranteed to rally their base: immigrants.

When you explain the moral issue at stake, i.e., the right to immigrate and our country’s history of open borders, the typical conservative avoids taking a stand by attempting to muddle the issue. “You’re right,” he’ll say, “but what about the welfare state? As long as immigrants can come here and live off welfare we can’t have open borders.”

For the libertarian, this isn’t an issue at all. Abolishing the welfare state is a number-one priority for principled libertarians. If there is in fact a problem with immigrants’ using too much welfare (though the conservative is silent on the issue of native-born folks’ using welfare, but we’ll get to that shortly) then that problem can be easily fixed: turn off the spigot of taxpayer funds and those who wish to loaf rather than work will stop coming here. Period.

This is particularly interesting because when it suits them conservatives are big anti-welfare-state types. The Republican Revolution of 1994 was characterized by rhetoric in favor of

reversing the nation's welfarist trend, and Republicans condescendingly sneer at liberals for their support of the welfare state, thinking themselves so far above the redistribution of wealth.

But having in (short) time retreated from that issue with complete indignity (George W. Bush is the biggest social spender since Lyndon Johnson), conservatives instead prefer to use it as an excuse to promote some "big-government" programs of their own — and keep voters on their side — and kick around the people they like the least: immigrants.

Last fall I had the pleasure of participating in an informal debate with a representative of the Center for Immigration Studies, a conservative think-tank based in Washington, D.C. Every argument he made hinged on immigrants' ability to abuse the welfare state.

When I pressed him long enough on the immorality of the welfare state itself — regardless of who was using it — he threw his hands up in despair and addressed the audience at large: "Who here thinks we'll ever get rid of the welfare state?"

So the jig was up: Conservatives aren't prepared to take on the unpopular issue of abolishing the welfare state, so immigrants have to take a bashing. That's unprincipled and cowardly.

Conservatives and the drug war

Another popular issue for conservatives is the drug war. Despite their small-government rhetoric anyone with a lick of sense can see the billions of dollars expended, the militarization of law-enforcement agencies, and the plethora of anti-drug laws enacted largely at the behest of conservative thinkers, as the Republicans' Achilles' heel. For all their talk about freedom and limited government, they like a big government around to pick on those drug-users — who are probably just liberals anyway, well except maybe for Rush Limbaugh.

So we return to our earlier argument: The drug war is an immoral use of government power to try to make peaceful and otherwise law-abiding people behave in a way that the politicians can approve of.

"You're right," the conservative will say, "but what about the welfare state? If drugs are legal then drug-users will destroy themselves and their families and taxpayers will end up footing the bill." (As if alcohol, which conservatives consume with a clear conscience, weren't responsible for a disproportionate amount of pain and misery!)

"Wait a minute!" the libertarian says. "I thought you conservatives were for abolishing the welfare state. If we get rid of welfare then drug users can't make their bad decisions a burden on society."

"That's true," the conservative says, "but it's politically unpopular to talk about getting rid of the welfare state."

The truth is, keeping the welfare state around a while longer makes it easy for conservatives to avoid tackling difficult issues and standing up for unpopular causes, all the

while kicking around people they don't like. Meanwhile, another group of peaceful people take a bashing because conservatives are unprincipled and cowardly.

Conservatives and public schooling

A third example is public "education." Conservatives know that public schools are a tragic and moral failure. They see the unthinking products of this institution and react with horror. "See," they say, "government isn't the solution — government is the problem!" (Conservatives love to quote Ronald Reagan.)

What is their solution? Vouchers.

That's right. When they see generation after generation of America's young marched off to the equivalent of the government indoctrination camps found in Cuba or the former Soviet Union, Republicans are so incensed that they demand that parents ... have a choice of which camp their child will go to!

Worse, the few private camps (I say private schools still qualify as government-controlled camps because they must, by law, conform to government "standards") that exist will become virtually indistinguishable from government camps once subsidized attendance becomes widespread enough. (See *Wickard v. Filburn*, 1943: "It is hardly lack of due process for the Government to regulate that which it subsidizes.")

Conservative commentators rail continually against the failure of public education, yet when the libertarian asks, "Why don't we abolish all publicly funded educational institutions?" the conservative answers, "We would, but those evil Democrats would have a field day denouncing us."

Translation: "We don't have the courage to stand by our alleged convictions."

Principle or expediency?

And finally, allow me to quote at length from a recent email sent out by the conservative Leadership Institute based in Arlington, Virginia:

Whether we conservatives like it or not, Civil Service employees have a lot of power. And they have good paying jobs and phenomenal job security. Yet most conservatives never consider seeking a U.S. Civil Service job. They should. Would you or someone you know consider a job in the Civil Service? If so the Leadership Institute can help. The Leadership Institute's Civil Service Opportunity School teaches conservatives how to get a job and succeed in the Civil Service. That is why I invite you to attend the Leadership Institute's Civil Service Opportunity School on May 15–17 starting 06:00 P.M. Whether you are a newcomer to Washington, D.C., or you are looking for a career change, this intensive seminar can give you the tools you need to begin your career in the Civil Service.... No

longer should conservatives allow liberals to monopolize the bureaucracy. Learn from top Washington insiders how to break into the liberal-dominated Civil Service.

Conservatives may as well run up the white flag and issue a press release: “If you can’t beat ’em, join ’em!”

This is the truth of the matter: Conservatives like to talk a good game about the need to rein in government spending, abolish particular programs, and downsize the number of bureaucrats, but at the end of the day they truly believe that a big government would probably work just fine if only they were in charge.

No doubt it would be an uphill battle for conservatives to change their big-government ways and embrace the libertarian vision of a free society. We libertarians know quite well how difficult it is to make the case for free markets, private property, and limited government.

Yet a principled approach to life requires doing the right thing, even when it’s not popular. Whether they’re too cowardly to stand by their principles or they don’t actually hold such views in the first place is irrelevant. When a Republican tells you he just votes for the “lesser of two evils,” don’t believe him — he doesn’t see his side as evil at all.

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