



11350 Random Hills Road, Suite 800, Fairfax, Virginia 22030 Phone (703) 934-6101 Fax (703) 352-3678

[fff@fff.org](mailto:fff@fff.org) [www.fff.org](http://www.fff.org)

---

## **Reaching Out to the Left, Part 2: The Issues**

**by Anthony Gregory**

Communicating libertarian ideals to the Left can be a challenge, but it can also help bolster our own understanding of our principles. Often, libertarians try to appeal to the Left by emphasizing our areas of agreement, which are conventionally seen as mostly including personal liberties and war. But even when we discuss those issues, it is important that we show how our positions stem from a consistent ideology, and explain to leftists how their own libertarian instincts conflict with their managerial, collectivist ones.

### **Civil liberties**

Classical liberals and modern liberals share a respect for civil liberties, but whereas the libertarian position flows from principles of self-ownership, property rights, and freedom of association, the conventional leftist position on civil liberties is often inconsistent with other leftist positions, and sometimes internally inconsistent as well.

Indeed, the very concept of civil liberties is incoherent without some conception of property rights. Freedom of speech doesn't include the right to scream obscenities at someone in his own private bedroom while he's trying to sleep. No one has a right to enter onto someone else's property for the purpose of prayer without the owner's consent. No, our freedom to speak, worship, and do with our bodies as we wish is somewhat conditional — it's bound by private-property rights. That is why questions regarding locker searches and prayer in public schools are so difficult: they do not involve clear property owners, but rather the muddled commons of public property. This is an important lesson to impart to the Left.

Meanwhile, we should show how serious we are about our common ground. Libertarians have done fairly well as it concerns the drug war, leading the reform movement and articulating the idea of self-ownership on the issue of drug use. Some libertarians have complained that we focus too much on the issue, but this is absolutely not true. When hundreds of thousands of people are imprisoned and the Bill of Rights has been ravaged, it is difficult to overstate the importance of the issue. It is also a good way to introduce a left-liberal to the real viciousness of

which the state is capable. After all, a state that will put half a million peaceful people in cages where rape and violence are endemic is perhaps not the best organization to promote a humane and caring world. Also, a point can be made about paternalism: A government big enough to provide one health care and other necessities is surely going to have an invasive interest in his lifestyle.

Civil liberties and criminal justice are also opportune issues for explaining the essence of state violence. All political power grows out of the barrel of a gun, and that gun tends to be in the hands of a cop. Left-liberals will often distrust police and question the justice of the prison system. Far from taking the conservative stance of defending these institutions, we should use such leftist skepticism as an opportunity to explain how all government programs are ultimately enforced by the police and jails that the Left questions. If leftists are sympathetic to the accused in criminal cases, they should also be less quick to think the worst of anyone accused of regulatory infractions. If they understand the civil-liberties implications and practical futility in banning drugs, they should see the problems with banning firearms. If they think the system is unfair to the disfranchised, they should be reluctant to cheer when tax dodgers are jailed.

This is a great occasion to cause cognitive dissonance in the leftist mindset, which is important in trying to reach out or convert. Demonstrate how leftists' own values conflict with some of the positions they hold. Ask them how they could have actually supported John Ashcroft's corrupt Justice Department when it went after Martha Stewart, or District Attorney Rudy Giuliani when he went after junk-bonds venture capitalist Michael Milken. You might be surprised how many left-liberals will concede they really don't know much about the issue if you politely point out that some of their leftist prejudices seem to conflict with their proclaimed core values of fairness, due process, and civil rights.

### **Foreign policy**

Especially as it concerns nationalist wars of the Bush variety, the Left tends to be better than the Right on foreign policy. This is another opportunity for more education. Why should a leftist who sees how his own democratic government practices murder and torture abroad trust the state to be kind and cuddly at home? And, for those liberals who were soft on Clinton's wars, why can they trust some politicians to bomb civilians, but not others?

War is actually the classic example of government central planning, and the failures of U.S. nation-building exercises abroad are not so qualitatively different from, or more surprising than, the inability of socialist domestic programs to produce and distribute goods fairly and efficiently. Furthermore, politicians lie and distort reality to promote their wars and exaggerate serious threats to the public safety. If leftists can understand that politicians frequently are dishonest and incompetent when it comes to their one most agreed-upon proper function —

protecting their citizens from foreign aggression — then perhaps they should be able to understand that those human flaws and organizational problems apply to domestic policy, too.

Indeed, left-liberals insist that they don't have to support foreign dictators such as Saddam Hussein to oppose the U.S. government's intervening against them. And they typically acknowledge just how monstrous such foreign dictators can be. Libertarians can point out how we have the same logic as it concerns other domestic ills, such as corporate greed. Certainly, if government violence and intervention might not be warranted against a true dictator such as Saddam Hussein, there might be some problem with administering government coercion against far more benign characters, such as Bill Gates, even if we don't like everything they do.

Where foreign policy and economics intersect, the Left is sometimes better than the Right. Many on the Left have been especially critical of the economic interventions against Cuba, Iraq, and other nations in the form of trade sanctions. This is a libertarian insight, whether or not they recognize it. They see the cruelty involved in cutting someone off from voluntary, commercial exchange. It is a matter of life or death for millions of people. This is a great starting point for discussing the importance of trade in the maintenance of civilization and peace. For libertarians only take their opposition to draconian trade restrictions to its logical extreme, opposing any and all violations of the freedom to contract and voluntarily exchange, whether within a country or internationally.

## **Economics**

It might come to some as a surprise, but libertarians can make a lot of progress talking to the Left about economics. Unfortunately, such dialogue is often counterproductive. Some of the fault lies with libertarians more intent on attacking the Left than actually persuading them.

First off, it's important not to come off as insulting. Don't disgustedly call the left-liberal a "commie" — unless, of course, you want all the leftists to keep believing in the socialism that is so destructive to our economy. If anything, encourage some cognitive dissonance by asking why your liberal friend is such a conservative, defending big government, which is as old and reactionary a political idea as any.

Without empire, the police state and corporate welfare — all of which liberals are at least skeptical about — the government would be much, much smaller and taxes considerably lower. During big wars, especially, conservatives are not particularly better on economics than liberals are, considering how much they want to tax (or inflate) and spend abroad.

But our economic common ground with the Left can actually go further than this. One thing that the Left should understand, but which we need to understand too if we want to explain it, is the profound ways in which big government actually advances big business and tramples over small entrepreneurs, fixed-income earners, and the working poor. An important book by leftist historian Gabriel Kolko, *The Triumph of Conservatism: A Reinterpretation of American*

*History* (1963), explains how corporate leaders in industry pushed for new regulatory agencies so as to help entrench themselves in a regulated market and bust their competition. This was also true during the New Deal (the head of General Electric was instrumental in the design of Roosevelt's infamous National Recovery Administration, for example), during the Great Society, and today as well. Often, it is the very interests being regulated who benefit most from the regulation.

One of the greatest big-government tools of corporatism is central banking. By inflating the money supply and giving the freshly printed dollars to its cronies in big banking, big business, and the military-industrial complex, the government effectively redistributes money from the poor and middle class to certain segments of the rich, who get the money first, before prices can adjust. By the time the people lower on the economic ladder get it, prices have gone up. Inflation is therefore a hidden tax and a regressive one at that.

There are other blatant ways big business benefits from big government. Eminent domain has increasingly and famously been used to seize private homes and businesses and give the property to big stores such as Costco. The local governments get more tax revenue and the companies more profits — again illustrating the connection between government power and corporate privilege. Minimum-wage laws and other regulations tend to benefit bigger businesses, which is why such corporate fat cats as the Wal-Mart CEO often favor them. Bush's prescription-drug program, the biggest expansion in welfare benefits since the Great Society, has also amounted to an explosion of corporate welfare for the pharmaceutical industry.

### **Environment and education**

As for the environment, property rights and the common law were stricter against pollution than the new regulatory bodies favored by big business, starting in the Industrial Revolution, as a way to socialize the costs of pollution all in the name of the "common good." Moreover, many businesses have jumped on the global-warming bandwagon, recognizing that the regulation of carbon emissions can be hugely profitable for established businesses in the form of subsidies and licensing agreements.

Even public education is potentially a winning issue with the Left, once you expose the history of public schools as instruments of nationalist propaganda and brainwashing and factories for churning out loyal workers, citizens, soldiers, and taxpayers. This is another area where moderate, middle-of-the-road libertarianism is often misguided. Reformist ideas such as school vouchers — which might effectively offer more choice to some parents while doing nothing to cut the government and indeed increasing government intervention into the private-school sector — are often more offensive to left-liberals than the radical idea of separating school entirely from the state, as we do with religion, and for many of the same reasons.

## **Privatization and free markets**

A similar trap comes with advocating the privatization of certain institutions such as Social Security, prisons, and war.

Social Security is a socialist redistribution program that inevitably relies on coercion; thus there is nothing there to privatize. The best thing would be to reduce spending on it, however quickly, until there is no program left, and also to free today's taxpayers from the payroll-tax burden as quickly as possible. Since Social Security is a regressive tax, left-liberals are sometimes more open to a principled position on it than schemes to "privatize" the program by enacting mandatory savings plans, establishing de facto subsidies for Wall Street, all the while socializing part of the stock market.

The irony is, such seemingly halfway reforms not only often fail to move us toward liberty; they are met with special resistance from the Left, which is particularly skeptical of any plan to hand social democracy over to corporate interests.

As for such things as prisons and war, we shouldn't push for privatization here, either. A partnership between business and private enterprise is not libertarian — indeed, it's a defining attribute of fascism — and that it might do its job more efficiently does not mean we should favor it. Some government programs are immoral and so we do not want to see them done more efficiently.

The true free market offers real liberation for everyone. The radical decentralism of power that comes with robust property rights means more equality and freedom for workers and less privilege and protection for the corporate elite. It means a fighting chance for the disfranchised. We should never fail to emphasize that.

Often, it is inconsistency or lack of clarity that makes libertarian thought scary to the Left. We should especially be careful not to be hypocrites. Yes, we should praise the glories of the Founding Fathers — but not pretend the Left doesn't have a real point about the origins of American government as an expansionist and aggressive slave state. Yes, we should champion free markets — but not give a pass to politicians such as Ronald Reagan, whose rhetoric was oftentimes good but whose policies were more often than not horrible for liberty.

All the while, a key is showing the leftist the obvious error of his ways. Confront the nonviolent activist with the violence inherent in gun control. Confront those who claim to speak for the poor with the regressive nature of Social Security and much of big government.

Even if you disagree with me on just how receptive the Left can be to libertarianism, we have no choice but to engage them on these issues. If we want to advance the cause of freedom, we must convince ever more people of its virtues. Many people are on the political Left, and such people tend to be interested in activism and ideas and are especially valuable to the cause of liberty when they finally come around and embrace the consistent libertarian program. Ignoring

them is not an option, and belittling them is not a luxury we can afford. We instead must reach out to them, showing the ones most receptive to our ideas that liberty brings social justice, private property brings liberation, and free enterprise is the economic system most compatible with a peaceful world.

*Anthony Gregory is a research analyst at the [Independent Institute](#), a policy adviser for the Future of Freedom Foundation, and a columnist at [LewRockwell.com](#). Anthony's website is [AnthonyGregory.com](#).*

**This article was originally published in the August 2008 edition of *Freedom Daily*.**