



BY EDWARD H. CRANE

## President's Message Three Cheers for Libertarianism

**A**s I survey the political landscape, infested with teeth-bared liberals and conservatives, all trying to get their hands on the levers of government power, I think it's great to be a libertarian. Live and let live. Tolerance. A respect for the dignity of the individual. As the pioneering modern libertarian Leonard Read put it: Anything that's peaceful. Government is not peaceful; it is inherently coercive.

The Cato Institute has distributed four million copies of the Declaration of Independence, for which we are quite proud. In the Declaration the Founders spoke of "self-evident" truths, among which are the rights to "Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness." To protect those rights, they said, governments are instituted. One of the myths about libertarians is that we are anti-government. We are not. We are, however, like the Founders, very much aware of the dangers and limitations of government not limited in terms of power and responsibilities. Which is why the Constitution enumerates what few powers the federal government possesses, or is supposed to possess, in America.

My favorite Charles Murray book is *In Pursuit: Of Happiness and Good Government*. In it he goes to great lengths to make the case that only strictly limited government can be considered good government. The natural response of mankind when confronted with a social pathology, he says, is to solve it. The response of government is to service it. To live a fulfilling life—to be happy—requires that one be in control of one's life. That's what the Founders were saying: Life is important and people should be able to pursue their dreams, interests, and ambitions. And that requires liberty.

Of course the American ship of state has sailed a bit off that course by now. But a majority of the American people, I believe, are still imbued with a respect for the dignity of the individual and a love of liberty. The growing ranks of Independents in politics today are a function of two things: Republicans and Democrats. If we use the Democratic debate as a proxy for liberal thinking on domestic issues, that thinking consists of demanding socialized medicine (it worked so well in Canada that last year the Supreme Court there opened their system up to private competition); soaking the rich (after all, the top 1 percent of earners pays only 35 percent of all income taxes); and stalling our economy over truly hysterical claims about global warming. Bob Kuttner and Paul Krugman are two of their leading public intellectuals. Enough said.

As for the woeful GOP, it's been taken over by neocons, social conservatives, theocons, and just plain cowardly incumbents (although fewer of those these days). The self-appointed "godfather" of neoconservatism, Irving Kristol, is openly disdainful of the intellectual giant of the 20th century, the great freedom philosopher F. A. Hayek. Kristol worships the memory of Franklin Roosevelt and embraces the concept of big government. The leading GOP public intellectuals are people like Bill Kristol (Irving's son) and David Brooks, both of whom beat the drums for the Iraq war disaster. Brooks recently called for the federal government to enlist clergy, economists, and psychologists to figure out how to help stressed-out families. Social conservatives are obsessed, not with limited government, but with gay marriage and flag burning. Theocons blamed 9-11 on gays and pornography. Do you really want to be in a party that celebrates Pat Robertson?

What both the left and the right overlook is our Founders' wisdom about the limits and dangers of government. Do we really want the people who took three days to realize Katrina was a disaster fixing stressed-out families? Do we really want the people who planned the aftermath of the Iraq war setting up space stations on the moon? Do we really want the people who created \$40 trillion of unfunded liabilities in Social Security and Medicare in charge of our health care? Faceless bureaucrats, power-lusting politicians, and people spending other people's money are a recipe for disaster.

But fear not, for there is hope. My colleague Brink Lindsey's remarkable new book, *The Age of Abundance*, makes a compelling case that the social, political, and business dynamic of the second half of the 20th century created a broad libertarian consensus in America that is socially tolerant and at the same time appreciative of market capitalism. (I'd add that the war in Iraq confirms the libertarian preference for humility in foreign affairs.) This is underscored by a poll we commissioned by Zogby that asked the question, "Would you describe yourself as fiscally conservative, socially liberal, also known as libertarian?" to which 44 percent of Americans replied in the affirmative.

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