**DEFUSING THE AMERICAN RIGHT**

Don Arthur examines whether the American conservative–libertarian fusion is breaking up

If you've read Christian Lander's blog *Stuff White People Like*, you know how neatly a group can be defined by their tastes. When Lander tells you that White People like talking about indie music, buying organic food, and hanging out in bicycle shops, you know straight away who he's talking about.

The American conservative movement is like that—except that it's more easily defined by what its members don't like. Conservatives don't like welfare, unions, environmentalism, or the progressive income tax. But most of all, conservatives don't like liberals.

In Australia we'd probably call liberals social democrats or the moderate left but whatever you call them, William F. Buckley could spot one faster than a White Person can spot a Toyota Prius. 'Blindfold me, spin me about like a top, and I will walk up to the single liberal in the room without zig or zag, and find him even if he is hiding behind the flower pot,' he wrote in the mid-1960s. But even he would admit that identifying his fellow conservatives was more of a challenge. That's because conservatives 'under the stress of our times, have had to invite all kinds of people into their ranks, to help with the job at hand.' And that's how it was for decades. Almost anyone could be a conservative just as long as they didn't like liberals.

As the founder of the *National Review*, Buckley was one of the conservative movement's most influential figures. It was a movement of ideas, of magazines and think tanks—a movement that hoped to steer electoral politics in a non-liberal direction.

Conservatives often say their movement is a fusion of libertarianism and traditionalist conservatism. That was the theory. In practice it worked something like this: libertarians quoted Friedrich Hayek and Milton Friedman while taking care of economic issues like tax cuts, privatisation, and free trade. Traditionalist conservatives quoted from Edmund Burke and T. S. Eliot, and handled more abstract issues like God, authority, and tradition. Frank S. Meyer, one of Buckley's colleagues at the *National Review*, came up with the idea of 'fusionism'—a philosophical rationale which attempted to explain why libertarians and traditionalists belonged together. It's difficult to know whether anyone was convinced. But since both groups hated liberals, it didn't really matter.

But by the 1980s, things had started to change. Two new groups, the neoconservatives and the religious right, joined the movement. Both were rebelling against the cultural libertarianism of the 1960s. Neoconservatives attracted considerable support from socially conservative donors such as the Olin and Bradley foundations. According to former Bradley Foundation president Michael S. Joyce, the movement turned its attention to the revolution in personal and sexual mores and the constant revaluation of values. 'We meant to make Nietzsche spin in his grave, like a top,' he said.

At around the same time, some American liberals started to drift towards libertarians on economic issues. To put it another way, they

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became more economically liberal (a few of them even started calling themselves neo-liberals, to distance themselves from old fashioned New Deal and Great Society liberals). Magazines like the Washington Monthly and the New Republic began to combine progressive ideals with free-market economics.

The rift between libertarians and conservatives is most obvious in online magazines and blogs popular with younger readers.

In response to these two trends, the movement’s centre of gravity began to shift. In 1995, William Kristol founded the neoconservative magazine the Weekly Standard. By the early 2000s, it had become almost as influential within the policy community as National Review. In the public mind, conservatives were people who supported the troops, feared God, respected the flag, and defended family values. And for those younger libertarians who revered Hunter S. Thompson as much as they did Friedrich Hayek, this was a problem.

Like John Stuart Mill, libertarians argue that as long as you don’t harm anyone else, you should be able to live whatever kind of life you choose. If this involves drugs, obscene literature, or a legally sanctioned homosexual relationship, that should be up to you. But for social conservatives, this sounds like exactly the kind of thing the movement doesn’t like. To them, it makes libertarians look like liberals.

The rift between libertarians and conservatives is most obvious in online magazines and blogs popular with younger readers. Libertarians who are interested in cultural as well as economic freedom gravitate towards magazines like Reason, while movement conservatives are more likely to favour the National Review Online (NRO), an online offshoot of the magazine Buckley founded in 1955.

One of Reason’s strongest complaints against social conservatives is their support for the war on drugs. Several years ago, Nick Gillespie wrote that ‘drug prohibition is underwritten by the sense that drug users are strange, alien beings, “others” who are out of control and must be stopped, for their good and ours.’ But from the perspective of Reason’s contributors, ‘it’s the people prosecuting the drug war who need to be stopped—the sooner, the better.’

This kind of thing was too much for Jonah Goldberg at NRO. He declared that ‘the real threat to America and the true opposition to conservatism’ was rapidly becoming the cultural libertarianism promoted by people at Reason magazine. For decades, the enemy had been the left-liberal heirs of Franklin Roosevelt and Lyndon Johnson. Now it was libertarians, who refused to allow their government to legislate for morality.

A few years later, at First Things magazine, a stronghold of grown-up religious conservatism, Joseph Bottum described the conservative movement as a ‘crack up waiting to happen.’ He called for a new, morally grounded alliance of social conservatives and neoconservatives, based on opposition to abortion at home and to anti-Western Islamism abroad. If this new alliance that built on the great moral causes of our age neglected tax reform and fiscal responsibility, Bottum argued, it was because economic issues were second-order issues. The first priority, he argued, must be to defeat ‘social defeatism.’ There was no place for libertarians in Bottum’s new conservative movement.

But now, in the wake of the Wall Street meltdown, economic issues are back on the agenda. This doesn’t make things any easier for libertarians. The crisis frames economic issues in a way that does nothing to advance the libertarian cause. As Reason’s David Weigel observes, ‘it is striking how free-market economics have no place in the current debate.’ Even the conservative Heritage Foundation is calling for more government involvement in the economy.

It’s hard not to wonder whether there is still a place in the conservative movement for people who believe in limited government and more personal freedom. Like many libertarians, the Cato Institute’s Brink Lindsey is appalled by the Bush administration’s record. ‘Republican rule in Washington has been an unmitigated disaster from a libertarian perspective,’ he writes, and points to
"runaway federal spending at a clip unmatched since Lyndon Johnson," farm subsidies, the war on terror and, of course, 'an atrociously bungled war in Iraq.' This raises an obvious question—if Bush represents modern conservatism, how much worse could liberalism be?

The problem isn't that conservatives are failing to live up to their principles. Instead, the problem is that limited government never has been a social conservative principle. The more influential social conservatives become within the movement, the more obvious this is. As Lindsey put it, "The old formulation defined conservatism as the desire to protect traditional values from the intrusion of big government; the new one seeks to promote traditional values through the intrusion of big government."

As far back as 1959, Friedrich Hayek warned that conservatives could not be trusted to defend liberty. In his essay 'Why I Am Not a Conservative,' he suggested that 'the conservative does not object to coercion or arbitrary power so long as it is used for what he regards as the right purposes.' He argued that conservatives lacked any principles which would allow them to work with people whose moral values were different to their own. So, if conservatives aren't guided by principles, what are they guided by?

The conservative mind

According to psychologist Jonathan Haidt, conservatives are guided by the same thing everyone is—their gut feelings about right and wrong. In Haidt's theory, moral intuitions come first and principled justifications later. He argues that the thing that sets conservatives apart is that they have a broader set of moral intuitions than other people.

Haidt asks us to imagine two societies, one organised according to John Stuart Mill's idea of the social contract, and the other based on Emile Durkheim's idea of an organic community. Mill argued that 'the only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilized community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others.' In this kind of society, it is up to each individual to decide what kind of life they want to lead. This is the kind of thing Jonah Goldberg calls cultural libertarianism—the idea 'that whatever ideology, religion, cult, belief, creed, fad, hobby, or personal fantasy you like is just fine so long as you don’t impose it on anybody else, especially with the government.'

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The Durkheimian society is different. Haidt writes that in this kind of society the 'basic social unit is not the individual, it is the hierarchically structured family, which serves as a model for other institutions. Individuals in such societies are born into strong and constraining relationships that profoundly limit their autonomy.' Ideally, autonomy is limited by the moral authority of group norms rather than by the coercive power of group leaders. As a result, Durkheimian societies 'value self-control over self-expression, duty over rights, and loyalty to one's groups over concerns for outgroups.'

Why do some people lean towards the first ideal and others the second? According to Haidt, moral intuitions rest on five foundations. Those who share Mill's vision are motivated only the first two while those who share Durkheim's are motivated by all five.

1. **Harm/care** is the first foundation. This flows from our ability to empathise and creates an aversion to seeing other people suffering. It generates feelings of compassion as well as approval for people who care for the vulnerable and protect those in danger.

2. **Fairness/reciprocity** is the foundation of judgments about justice and is associated with feelings of anger, guilt, and gratitude. Fairness is about following rules that enable individuals to cooperate in mutually beneficial activities. When people believe that they or others have been treated unfairly they feel anger. When they believe that they have treated others unfairly they feel guilt.
3. **Ingroup/loyalty** is about putting the group first. To be loyal to the family, tribe, or nation is to put its interests and welfare above your own and those of outsiders. It is associated with feelings of trust towards other group members and wariness and distrust towards outsiders.

4. **Authority/respect** is associated with feelings of awe and admiration towards the group’s governing institutions and leaders. It gives rise to virtues such as respect, duty, and obedience.

5. **Purity/sanctity** is associated with the emotion of disgust. At its core, this foundation has to do with an aversion to things linked to the spread of disease, such as rotting meat, pus, and physical deformity. To be pure is to keep yourself clean and disease-free. It gives rise to rules about food, hygiene, and sexual behaviour. A person who feels that they are morally unclean feels shame.

Along with liberals, Goldberg’s cultural libertarians dismiss social norms based on the last three foundations as conservative moralism. Rather than treating them as legitimate matters for government action, they regard them as personal preferences or prejudices. A few years ago, libertarian writer Will Wilkinson wrote that ‘it’s not far wrong to say the whole history of humankind has been characterized by affronts to liberty in the name of morality.’

It’s not hard to see what’s going on here. Convinced that homosexuality and drug use are immoral acts, many social conservatives want the government to take action. But libertarians insist that the only justification for restricting an individual’s freedom is to prevent harm to others. Buckley responds by recasting a stigmatising punishment as an attempt to prevent harm. ‘Our society is generally threatened,’ he insists.

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**An unstable truce**

In the past, the conservative movement enforced a kind of truce between social conservatives and libertarians. Social conservatives were supposed to agree that they could not use the power of the state to enforce morality, while libertarians would agree not to complain when conservatives denounced immorality in public. Thinkers at the *National Review* even invented a philosophical doctrine to justify this standoff. According to Frank Meyer’s doctrine of ‘fusionism,’ the purpose of human life was the pursuit of virtue. But by its nature, a life of virtue must be voluntarily chosen.

That was the theory. But in practice what happened was that social conservatives learned how to recast moral arguments as arguments about harm and justice. For example, in 1986 William F. Buckley wondered out loud whether people with HIV should be publicly identified and segregated. In the end he decided that this would be an overreaction. Instead he proposed that ‘Everyone detected with AIDS should be tattooed in the upper forearm, to protect common-needle users, and on the buttocks, to prevent the victimization of other homosexuals.’

Some libertarians have wondered whether there can ever be a stable alliance of libertarians and social conservatives. As Wilkinson writes, ‘In order to get libertarianism and genuinely traditional morality to fit together, one must dismantle traditional morality and extract one of the mainsprings—the part that says it is morally permissible and often obligatory to compel people with the threat of violence to meet their moral obligations. Once you’ve put things back together again, you haven’t anything traditional in the normal sense of the word.’

As a guardian of the movement, Goldberg attempts to discipline libertarians who complain too loudly about conservative moralism. He writes that, ‘cultural libertarianism is essentially a form of arrogant nihilism. There are no universal truths or even group truths (i.e., the authority of tradition, patriotism, etc.)—only personal ones.’

Of course, the people Goldberg is attacking are not nihilists. They do not believe that joining a Nazi skinhead gang and beating up homosexuals is just another legitimate lifestyle choice. And their complaints about religiously motivated censorship
are moral complaints. The tension with social conservatives arises because they take the first two foundations for granted but not the bottom three. When Goldberg accuses cultural libertarians of being nihilists, he is operating in neoconservative mode. He is wondering how anyone can question some of our culture's moral foundations without questioning all of them.

Early neoconservatives like Irving Kristol brought to the movement a philosophically sophisticated way of recasting conservative moral arguments as arguments about threats to the security of society. The neoconservatives argued that once intellectuals began to question morality and insisted that it be justified by reason, they put society on a slippery slope to nihilism. It might begin with scepticism about sexual morality or prohibitions against sacrilege and blasphemy, but it will end by undermining our belief in everything, including prohibitions against harm and injustice. This argument was useful to the movement because it gave its intellectuals a rationale for embracing positions the religious right and socially conservative blue-collar voters were enthusiastic about. Quoting Friedrich Hayek or Milton Friedman would not have done the trick.

The neoconservatives were not entirely wrong. Enlightenment rationality has had a corrosive effect on the idea of objective moral truth. For example, the classical liberal economist James Buchanan argues that values are ultimately grounded in individuals. He believes that classical liberalism is incompatible 'with any transcendental ordering of values.' Friedrich Hayek had a similar position. 'However much we dislike it,' he said, 'we are again and again forced to recognise that there are no truly absolute values whatever. Not even human life itself.'

The problem with neoconservatism is that it grossly overestimates the importance of philosophy. If Haidt is right, philosophical arguments about morality rarely motivate behaviour. What matters most are the intuitions—not the arguments we use to systematise and justify them.

The coming realignment?
When your political allies think that you are an amoral menace to civilisation, what should you do? Libertarianism is not a popular philosophy. Its supporters have never controlled a major political party or created a popular mass movement. They can join together with people who share at least some of their concrete objectives and attempt to influence the political system and the culture.

The question is who to join with. In 2006, Brink Lindsey argued that it was time for libertarians to abandon their alliance with conservatives and reach out to liberals. He imagined a new politics which 'joins together under one banner the causes of both cultural and economic progress.'

While many libertarians like to call themselves 'classical liberals,' few want to return to an idealised past. Instead, they see themselves as the most progressive of all political groupings. According to Lindsey, 'the rival ideologies of left and right are both pining for the '50s. The only difference is that liberals want to work there, while conservatives want to go home there.'

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Almost ten years ago, Virginia Postrel wrote in Reason that the most serious threat to free market institutions was not socialism but the desire for stability and control. Markets can be disruptive and chaotic, and not everyone is better off when things change. Markets change the culture, the way people live, and the things they value. Postrel argued that the free market's enemies ranged across the left–right spectrum.

Supporting economic freedom while opposing cultural change is a difficult position to sustain. In his recent book The Age of Abundance, Brink Lindsey argues that many of the cultural changes that conservatives rail against are a result of the operation of the free market. Markets foster technological innovation, and this constantly upends established ways of life. Cars, television, and home computers have all transformed society—not always in ways conservatives approve of.
Philosophically, liberals might seem a better fit than conservatives. After all, many political liberals are also philosophical liberals—their vision of a good society is closer to Mill's than to Durkheim's. But do philosophy and the intuitive moral judgment it rests on really determine political outcomes?

*Reason* contributor Julian Sanchez writes, 'I see my views as part of the line running through Mill and Rawls much more than, say Burke—but this ends up making relatively little difference in terms of practical policy debates, which are driven by coalitions of interest groups that libertarians lack the numbers to unsettle.'

But maybe the main game is not practical policy debate. If libertarians detach themselves from the conservative movement they may also decide to pull back from retail politics. Rather than trying to influence politicians or offer detailed analyses on specific issues, they will concentrate on changing the broader climate of opinion. In the long run, this may end up being a more effective strategy.

The trouble now is that everyone on the American right is caught up the plunging fortunes of the Bush administration. Like toxic debt, the collapse is spreading through the movement. As *Reason* editor Matt Welch writes, there's a downside to joining big-tent coalitions: 'Even if your ideological bloc-within-a-bloc is dwindling and disrespected, when it supports the party in power it will inevitably be branded with that government's failings.'

"We must make the building of a free society once more an intellectual adventure, a deed of courage. If we can regain that belief in the power of ideas which was the mark of liberalism at its best, the battle is not lost."

F. A. Hayek

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