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The 'libertarian' threat



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By Antony Davies & James R. Harrigan

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Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid calls them anarchists. Sen. John McCain speaks of “libertarian kids” in condescending tones. One thing on which Democrats and Republicans agree is that libertarians represent a threat.

Hyperbole and ridicule aside, one thing is true — libertarians approach questions differently than do Democrats and Republicans. Where the major parties develop “platforms” of issues they support, libertarians begin with a single assumption with which most everyone can agree — all humans are free and equal in dignity by virtue of their being human. Everything else is commentary.

The reason for partisan scorn is that the two-party faithful do not grasp that libertarians don't think in terms of issues. Libertarians think in terms of principles. They begin with the principles of freedom and equality and apply these timeless

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principles to the issues of the day. What emerges is an extraordinarily civil discourse. The civility arises because libertarians begin at a point of consensus, not a point of contention.

Lest there be any doubt, consider that libertarians as a group agree on very little apart from their first principles. In short they disagree on how their first principles should be applied in almost all matters. And this is a roadmap for America.

Debates between Republicans and Democrats are vitriolic because they inevitably begin from a point of maximum disagreement. Should we, for example, have universal health care? This is not the place to start a discussion. It is the place to start a fight.

Consider abortion, perhaps our greatest point of national disagreement. Libertarians have not achieved consensus on this matter any more than the country at large. But the libertarian approach to the issue allows people who disagree to get along and to discuss the issue intelligently. This is because they see first their commonality, not their differences. Everyone agrees on the principles involved, namely that human beings have a right to life and that women have the right to do what they please with their bodies. It is because of this agreement that libertarians are able to focus on the pivotal question — whether the unborn is human — without hostility. Politics is largely a matter of balancing rights that are in conflict. The key to functional politics is to discuss matters logically and factually from principled grounds.

Yet, don't mistake their differences of opinion as an "agreement to disagree." Libertarians on both sides of the debate continually engage with the other side. But not because they are looking to win the debate. They are looking to discover the truth.

Abandoning first principles is what has gotten America into the morass we now inhabit. If we are to survive and prosper as a nation, Republicans and Democrats alike must stop their partisan bickering and start their discussions on basic points of agreement. And what could be more American than beginning with the simple assertion that freedom and equality are the birthright of every person? From there, logic and decency can get us most of the way home.

Libertarians are a threat — but only to incivility and unprincipled argument. And that is a welcome threat.

Antony Davies is associate professor of economics at Duquesne University. James R. Harrigan is a fellow of the Institute of Political Economy at Utah State University.

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