



BY DAVID BOAZ

“Libertarians believe in the centrality of law. As John Locke so memorably put it, “Where there is no Law, there is no Freedom.””

Editorial Are You Now or Have You Ever Been a Libertarian?

We’ve grown accustomed to the cartoonish misrepresentation of the idea of individual liberty. E. J. Dionne Jr. of the *Washington Post*, for instance, has written that modern libertarians believe that “individuals come into the world as fully formed adults who should be held responsible for their actions from the moment of their birth.” Columnist Charles Krauthammer wrote that the libertarian vision (except for Charles Murray’s) is of “a race of rugged individualists each living in a mountaintop cabin with a barbed wire fence and a ‘No Trespassing’ sign outside.” And then there’s former Bush speechwriter Michael Gerson, who thinks that the “virtual world” *Second Life* (a computer game to us older folks) is “a large-scale experiment in libertarianism.” And that libertarian world “is highly sexualized,” with “frequent outbreaks of terrorism . . . strip malls everywhere, pushing a relentless consumerism, [and] . . . an inordinate number of vampires.”

It’s not only avowed critics of libertarianism who mischaracterize our ideas, but even some friends who offer a subtler critique. They are people who give an overly radical definition of libertarianism so that they can present themselves as the reasonable advocates of limited government, not the crazy libertarians.

I’ll start with the followers of Ayn Rand, or Objectivists. Rand condemned libertarians as “hippies of the right,” who lacked a sound philosophical foundation for their defense of capitalism and individual rights. But anyone who believes in individual rights, free enterprise, and strictly limited government—as Objectivists do—is a libertarian.

Another example is Mickey Edwards, a former congressman and former chairman of the American Conservative Union. In his new book *Reclaiming Conservatism*, Edwards explains that he sees “conservatism” as a philosophy of liberty, the dignity of the individual, and limited government. He then writes: “I am not a libertarian in the purist sense. I believe there are important roles for government, but like many conservatives I believe in a government constrained by certain fundamental and overarching principles, and in a framework that holds those principles in place: the diffusion and balancing of governmental powers and an unassailable system to protect the individual liberties of the American people.”

Similarly, the historian Matthew Dallek writes that Sen. Barry Goldwater, a hero to many libertarians and small-government conservatives, “was no strict libertarian. Appealing to those on the right who longed to recapture lost certitudes, he argued that the state had a duty to maintain order and promote virtue. ‘Politics,’

Goldwater wrote, is ‘the art of achieving the maximum amount of freedom for individuals that is consistent with the maintenance of social order.’”

Goldwater may not have been a strict libertarian. But that quotation from *The Conscience of a Conservative* certainly doesn’t disprove the claim. Seeking to achieve “the maximum amount of freedom for individuals that is consistent with the maintenance of social order” is a core concern of a libertarian.

And I’ll bet that Mickey Edwards knows that most libertarians believe in a government constrained by a constitutional framework based on fundamental principles including the diffusion of power.

Through such “triangulation,” positioning himself between the extremes of anarchy and overweening government, a writer can place himself in the sensible center, always a good and reasonable place to be.

But libertarians believe in the centrality of law. As John Locke so memorably put it, “Where there is no Law, there is no Freedom.” It just isn’t accurate to say that you’re not a libertarian because you believe in liberty under law.

Libertarianism is the view that each person has the right to live his life in any way he chooses so long as he respects the equal rights of others. Libertarians defend each person’s right to life, liberty, and property—rights that people have naturally, not as gifts from government. In the libertarian view, human relationships should be voluntary; the only actions that should be forbidden by law are those that involve the initiation of force against those who have not themselves used force—actions such as murder, rape, robbery, kidnapping, and fraud. Legitimate governments act to protect us from others and do not themselves violate rights.

Libertarians believe in the presumption of liberty. In contemporary politics, they want to make government a lot smaller in order to expand the scope of human liberty.

We need to continue to work to correct the mischaracterizations of libertarianism presented by critics such as Dionne, Krauthammer, and Gerson. But it would also be useful if there were some agreement on terms, that a libertarian is someone who believes in liberty, not in chaos; in the rule of law, not in lawlessness; and in a voluntary social order, not in anomie and isolation. Libertarianism is the heart and soul of the modern world. There’s no reason to run away from it.