

Cato's Letter

A QUARTERLY MESSAGE ON LIBERTY

Conquering Terrorism with Capitalism

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My stock-in-trade is making fun of our government. The problem is, in a time of national crisis like this, I just don't feel like making fun of our government. You will notice, if you go back historically to another time of crisis, to World War II, that there were no wisecracks about Churchill's waistline. Dirty stories about Franklin and Eleanor weren't all over the Internet in 1942, like dirty stories about Bill and Hillary are. People may have told Stalin jokes, but the firing squad ruined the punch line.

I'm not going to go against the grain of history here. Besides, George W. Bush has grown a foot since September 11. His ears no longer stick out and he has become a brilliant orator.

It's true. I'm not kidding about any of that.

The following is an abridged version of P. J. O'Rourke's speech given at Cato Institute seminars across the country. O'Rourke is a correspondent for *The Atlantic Monthly* and author of *Parliament of Whores, Eat the Rich, and The CEO of the Sofa*.



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I have friends who are total Democrats who have told me how glad they are that Republicans are in office. It's not because my Democratic friends have suddenly become conservative, let alone libertarian; it's the hip to be square factor. It's the fact that Republicans are squares. And it's the squares who know how to fly the fighter planes and operate the missiles and the bombs and work the M-16s. Liberals would still be fumbling

especially when we're fighting these abstemious, prohibitionist, fundamentalist groups — that the bars stay open. I got up to Capitol Hill and went to Bullfeathers, a bar where a lot of congressional staff hang out. Congress had been evacuated from the Capitol, but they had only gone about a block to Bullfeathers. There was one congressman from Pennsylvania calmly having lunch with his daughter. I checked I.D.; it really was his daughter.



“It's the squares who know how to fly the fighter planes and operate the missiles and the bombs and work the M-16s. Liberals would still be fumbling with the federally mandated trigger locks.”

with the federally mandated trigger locks. Even my Democratic friends can imagine Gore in the White House with Ralph Nader heading the Department of Defense and Oprah as secretary of state, and they realize that it just wouldn't work that well.

Terrorist theories

I was in Washington when the attacks happened and nobody was paralyzed by terror. Cars were leaving downtown Washington quite reasonably. All the traffic was headed out to the suburbs as though it were the evening rush hour, except it was quiet. There was none of the usual honking and lights blinking and brakes screeching. I didn't know what else to do with myself, so I went downtown and started reporting. All the cars and trucks were gone from downtown D.C. It was the vision of what Sierra Club types want for our cities. (I sincerely hope that this is not the tactic that the Sierra Club chooses to pursue its goals.)

There were still people downtown and the bars were open. It's very important —

He wanted to convene a joint session of Congress right away, in the Capitol building, just to show the world that we're still in business. That was one set of feelings on Capitol Hill. Of course there was another set of feelings, too. There was anger. I talked to a Senate aide who was thinking, like a lot of us were that day, that we should just nuke the bastards. “Time to turn sand into glass,” the Senate aide said.

It was a tempting idea. Those were the feelings that I heard expressed. Nobody even mentioned being terrorized by the terror attacks. I talked to another Senate aide, who told me that the congressional leadership had been whisked away to an undisclosed location. Then he said that, as far as he was concerned, quite a bit of that congressional leadership could just stay there. Which brings us to the first theory of terrorism.

“We are a free people. You cannot destroy our leadership. We are our leadership.”

THE FIRST THEORY OF TERRORISM:**Terrorism will paralyze America with**

fear. We're kind of forgetting what all our international critics have been saying about us for years—that America is a monstrous country, a sort of Godzilla of capitalism bestriding the globe and wrecking everything. One nice thing about being a Godzilla is that Godzilla doesn't get scared. Godzilla doesn't suddenly turn tail and run down across the Mexican border to buy Cipro over the counter. Godzilla doesn't freak out when they come at him. Mean, monstrous, horrible doesn't get paralyzed with fear. Osama bin Laden forgot that we're not the scared country; we're the scary country.

THE SECOND THEORY OF TERRORISM:**The structure of our society can be destroyed by destroying our leadership.**

We libertarians know that this is not true. We are a free people. We are self-organizing. You can't destroy our leadership. We are our leadership. You can't destroy America by destroying our elite. Think about America's elite. Think about it down through history. Destroy our elite and about half the time you're doing us a favor.

THE THIRD THEORY OF TERRORISM:**Terrorist acts will cause us to give in to the impulse to turn sand into glass.**

This is actually the one that I find most distasteful and most frightening. They believe America's response to terrorism will be so horrific — nuking Kabul and Baghdad and Damascus — that all the Muslim people in the world will be galvanized to al-Qaeda's side. That really is the worst of the theories of terrorism. Because what it tells us about these terrorists is that they want people, their own people, millions of their own people, to die. That is part of their objective here, to kill millions of their own people

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to heighten contradictions in the fight with the Great Satan.

President Bush has told us all to get back to business. My business is making fun of government even in times of national crisis — maybe especially in times of national crisis. Because in times of crisis, we tend to rely on the government. And that's good. The free market is a wonderful thing, but we have just seen the results of privatization of physical force, of deadly force. We do not want a free market in mass destruction. A freely elected, democratic government rightly owns a monopoly on force — the only monopoly it rightly owns. But when we start relying on government, the tendency is to rely on government for everything. And that is not good.

We have to be very careful about America's emotional temptation to interfere with market forces by political means during a time of crisis — and on a couple of grounds:

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1. It won't work. Calling on the government for help when the economy is in trouble is like mailing a postcard to the fire department when your house is in flames — help is not likely to arrive in time. Also, it's the government you've sent that postcard to, and governments can get mixed up. The government may send mailmen instead of firemen to your house to put out the fire.

2. It will take over everything. There is that enormous physical power, that monopoly on deadly force that the government has. What that means is that government interference in economic matters, with the enormous power that the government has, will always be the old story of the lion lying down with the lamb chop. You're not going to stand a chance when the government gets in there as your partner in business.

The laws of the marketplace are physical laws, and they don't become suspended in a crisis any more than the

law of gravity does. At this moment, more than ever, it is your duty as libertarians to make money. Because increase in personal wealth is how the wealth of a society increases.

Wealth is not a zero-sum game

Wealth is not a pizza; if you have too many slices you don't have to eat the Domino's box.

In a free country, with the rule of law and property rights, there are no losers when somebody gets rich. I say this even though Bill Clinton just negotiated a \$12 million book contract.

That's more than the pope got. I'll bet it turns out that the pope was franker about his sex life. I say, good for you, Bill. Good for you. The wealth of society is increased by personal productivity even when that productivity takes some very odd turns.

Wealth creates a free and peaceful world

I'll tell you why I am so concerned about increasing the wealth of our society just now, at a moment when a lot of people are most concerned about increasing the security of our society or increasing the power of our society to create a free and peaceful world. In creating a free and peaceful world we have to take a long view. Back when the world was very poor, in 1820, before the Industrial Revolution had really kicked in, the 10

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largest economies in the world were China, India, France, Britain, Russia, Japan, Austria, Spain, the United States, and Prussia, in that order. Only two of those countries, Britain and the United States, were democracies, and very imperfectly so. Every country on that list, except Japan, was engaged in wars of conquest or internal repression. The only reason that Japan wasn't doing it was because the Shogun had taken away the rickshaw keys and everybody in the country was grounded.

Then came the great growth of wealth that followed the Industrial Revolution, the enormous explosion of wealth in the 19th and 20th centuries. Today we live in a much, much wealthier world. The largest economies in the

like weird food and exotic women.

Rich people don't like to be in the military. The shoes are ugly and the uniforms itch. Rich people don't go in much for revolution or terrorism, either. There are the exceptions, the wealthy fanatics like Osama bin Laden. But we all know from our personal experience with rich people that those are exceptions, and those are rare exceptions.

You see, what I want is a world where Osama bin Laden calls up one of the members of his sleeper cells— somebody who has been sent to the United States to live like an ordinary person, who has been here for years and years— and I want Osama bin Laden to call that guy up and have the guy answer the phone and say, “Osama, oh, good

“In times of crisis, we tend to rely on the government. And that's good. But when we start relying on government, the tendency is to rely on government for everything. And that is not good.”



world are America, Japan, Germany, France, Britain, Italy, China, Brazil, Canada, and Spain. All but China are democracies. If we measure according to per capita GDP, the news is even better. Luxembourg, the United States, Bermuda, Switzerland, Singapore, Hong Kong, Monaco, Norway, Cayman Islands, and Belgium. All of these places are marvelously well behaved.

The rich countries are good and the good countries are rich. That's a wonderful thing, because wealthy democracies don't fight each other. Once people get rich, they just don't like to fight as much anymore. Yes, there is an Argentine idiocy every now and then, in the Falklands. Yes, the French send troops to West Africa now and then, but it's because the French

to hear from you. Blow up Paris on Thursday? Gee, Osama, I'd love to, but Thursday the kid has got her ballet recital. If you're late for something like that, they never forgive you. Friday? Friday is no good. I've got to see my mom off on her Bermuda cruise in the morning. It's Fatima's yoga day. I've got a big golf match at the club. And Saturday is out; we're driving out to the Hamptons for the weekend.”

You see, we've all got to do our duty in these times. Our foremost duty is to make everyone on earth fat, happy, self-indulgent, and terribly overscheduled on their social calendars. Ladies and gentlemen, I say to you that it is your duty as libertarians to go make a huge pile of money as soon as you can.

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–P. J. O’Rourke



P. J. O’Rourke at a recent seminar at the Cato Institute.

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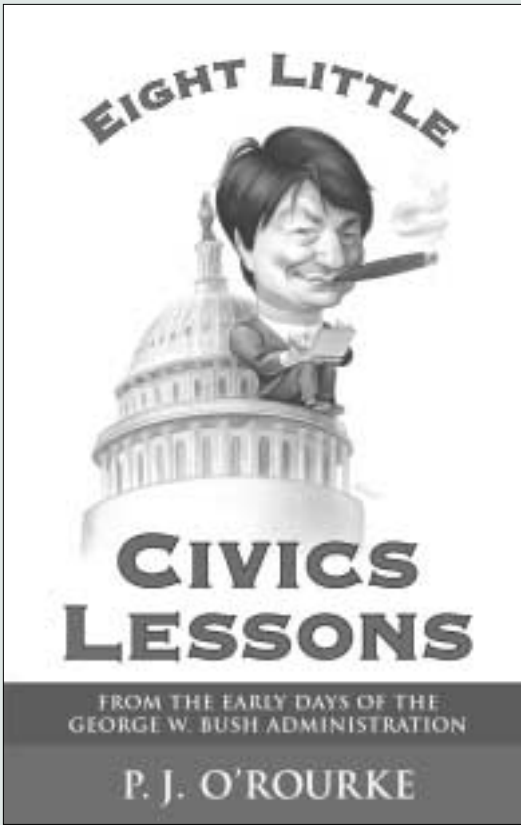
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