



BY DAVID BOAZ

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Editorial

Top 10 Ways to Talk about Libertarianism

I give a lot of speeches and interviews about libertarianism. Often I have to begin simply by explaining what libertarianism is. Always I'm looking for effective ways to convey the essential libertarian ideas. So today I'm just setting out very briefly my Top 10 Ways to Talk about Libertarianism.

10. When I talk in the broadest terms about Americans who hold libertarian views, I often use the popular journalistic phrase “fiscally conservative and socially liberal”—as in my new ebook with David Kirby and Emily Ekins, *The Libertarian Vote: Swing Voters, Tea Parties, and the Fiscally Conservative, Socially Liberal Center*.

9. I'm also partial to Adam Smith's lovely phrase, “the simple system of natural liberty.” Set up a few simple rules, protect people's rights, and liberty is what happens naturally.

8. The most eloquent piece of libertarian writing in history is Thomas Jefferson's Declaration of Independence, and “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” is a great statement of the libertarian vision.

7. I like this rarely quoted line from Ayn Rand:

If men of good will wish to come together for the purpose of upholding reason and establishing a rational society, they should begin by following the example of the cowboys in Western movies when the sheriff tells them at the door to a conference room: “Gentlemen, leave your guns outside.”

Exactly. Civilized people rely on persuasion, not force.

6. Sometimes I organize a speech around three key ideas of libertarianism:

Spontaneous order: the understanding that most of the order in society, from language and law to the economy, happens naturally, without a central plan; Natural rights: the rights to life, liberty, and property that we have inherently, not as a gift from government; and

Limited government: the political system that protects our rights without infringing on our freedom.

5. At Tom Palmer's urging, I created a speech, or at least a speech opening, around the theme that “Libertarianism is the application of science and reason to the study of politics and public policy.” That is, libertarians deal in reality, not magic. We know that

government doesn't have magical powers to ignore the laws of economics and human nature.

4. Inspired by Robert Fulghum's bestseller *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*, I like to tell people that you learn the essence of libertarianism—which is also the essence of civilization—in kindergarten:

Don't hit other people.
Don't take their stuff.
Keep your promises.

3. Another pithy explanation I like came from a high-school libertarian newsletter some 20 years ago:

Smokey the Bear's rules for fire safety also apply to government—keep it small, keep it in a confined area, and keep an eye on it.

2. In *Libertarianism: A Primer*, I described the fundamental libertarian principle this way:

The corollary of the libertarian principle that “Every person has the right to live his life as he chooses, so long as he does not interfere with the equal rights of others” is this:
No one has the right to initiate aggression against the person or property of anyone else.

This “non-aggression axiom” is perhaps most associated with Ayn Rand and Murray Rothbard, but its roots go back to Spencer, Mill, Locke, Pufendorf, and even Epicurus.

1. And finally, the number 1 way to talk about libertarianism—or at least a sentence I found effective when I was talking about *Libertarianism: A Primer* on talk shows: “Libertarianism is the idea that adult individuals have the right and the responsibility to make the important decisions about their lives.” Every word is important there: We're talking about individuals. We're talking about adults; the question of children's rights is far more complex. Responsibility is just as important as rights.

Of course, today government claims the power to make many of those decisions for us, from where to send our kids to school to what we can smoke to how we must save for retirement. And that is why it's important for us to promote the ideas of liberty and to do so as effectively as we can.