

Liberty's Last Dance

OK, so this Baby Boomer has grown less libertarian, and more conservative in his old age. But I could still change. Three things in particular are giving me pause.

First, there's the sudden decline and fall of Eliot Spitzer, the former governor of New York. I am enough of a libertarian to think that prostitution should be legal in a few places—and enough of a conservative to think it should be illegal in most places, including Washington D.C. So no sympathy for Spitzer from me.

Yet unfortunately, a government powerful enough to supervise virtue is also powerful enough to indulge its own particular vices. Consider: If the federal government can catch Spitzer because he moved around \$80,000 in cash—not much, in a \$14-trillion-a-year economy—then the netting of Uncle Sam's financial dragnet has become, indeed, a tight mesh.

And as a further wrinkle, search engines are now enabling everybody to look up anybody and thereby link, in cybernetic eternity, Spitzer and, say, his temporary girlfriend, Ashley Alexandra Dupre. Indeed, it's hard to imagine that E.M. Forster felt it necessary to tell us to get connected; that's all we are now—connected.

None of us are islands anymore. There's no need to send to know because we already know—or at least the Feds know.

A second spur to neo-libertarianism is the growing power of the homeland securitizers, post-9/11. The Patriot Act never bothered me, and I support building a wall on the southern border. And if we have a national ID card, that's good; it will cut down on vote fraud. Besides, what with surveillance cams and credit cards, I have no doubt They know where I am all the time anyway. But let's remember,

things can get worse because power in the name of security soon metastasizes into power as a threat to liberty.

Thus a recent incident in Washington D.C. is a disturbing indicator. On April 12, the eve of Thomas Jefferson's 265th birthday, a group of 20 or so libertarians gathered for an iPod-based silent “dance in” at the Jefferson Memorial. There's no curfew in the area; plenty of other tourists were there, too. Yet one of the “flash-mobbers,” a 20-something female, was arrested by the National Park Service police for disorderly conduct, and the other dancing liberty-lovers were shooed away.

One needn't pity this young woman too much; she will have lots of publicity and plenty of lawyers. Her nonviolent conduct that night, and seemingly unreasonable arrest, are all visible on YouTube, and she will no doubt get the smartest constitutional lawyer that the Cato Institute can cough up. Still, it's no fun to be arrested, and if the cops can confuse a high-spirited young woman out for a lark, with, say, al-Qaeda, then maybe they need to learn profiling after all.

A third reason for re-reading Ayn Rand is a new report on the costs of global warming, issued by the Congressional Budget Office. The study finds that S. 2191, the Lieberman-Warner “cap and trade” global-warming bill, will cost \$1.2 trillion over 10 years.

Of course, few observers think this legislation will actually do much of anything to reduce greenhouse gases around the world. The green argument is more long term and complicated than

that—as wishful political thinking always is. Yet the greens say that if the U.S. goes first in reductions, then other countries will be inspired by our example and go second. That is, the Chinese, for instance, will take time out from importing our factories, and beating up Tibetan monks, to follow our lead.

Now where have we seen this sort of thinking before? The idea is to propitiate some abstract deity with a costly offering, burnt or otherwise, and then, miraculously, we are rewarded with better weather. Peter Berger's 1974 book, *Pyramids of Sacrifice*, identified a continuity between the self-abnegation of ancient barbaric rituals and the pathetic confessions characterizing *Darkness at Noon*-style dictatorships. And the same mumbo-jumbo propitiatory thinking animates our politics today. We sacrifice our wealth and economic freedom on the altar of an abstraction—Presto! The righteous are rewarded.

So will conservatives join libertarians in opposition to such foolishness? One would hope so, but it's worth remembering that the Lieberman-Warner bill was once the McCain-Lieberman bill. Senator McCain de-emphasized his greenness to win the Republican nomination, but what would President McCain do? Might he feel the need to make nice with the Left so he can continue to make war in the Middle East? In reality, there's no need to ask the question, since he has already said he would do just that.

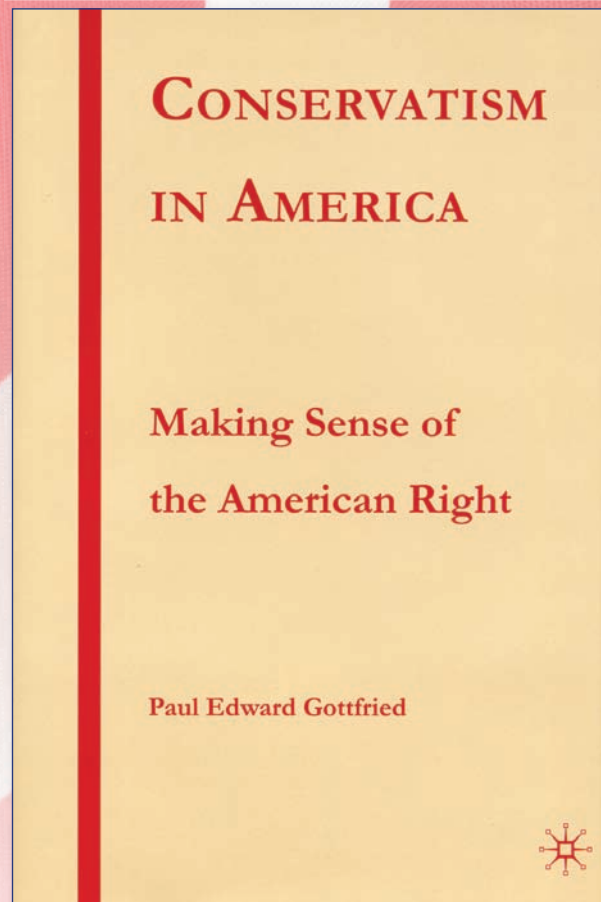
If conservatives put loyalty to their conservative president ahead of their defense of the U.S. economy and American sovereignty, then 200-proof libertarianism will start to look good. Although one should always keep, of course, the conservative's sober and instinctive pessimism. ■

“A must read for students of American conservatism.”

—Peter Brimelow, Editor, VDARE.COM

“Paul Gottfried... poses the painful questions that others flee from and offers interpretations that compel close attention from all who wish to understand the prospects for a conservative movement.”

—Eugene D. Genovese, author of
The Southern Tradition: The Achievement and Limitations of an American Conservatism



In this important book, Paul Edward Gottfried gives a fascinating account of the American conservative movement, arguing that it has been largely an invention of journalists and Republican activists. He shows how the movement has exaggerated the permanence of its values, and how both its instilled anti-Communism and its rejection of dissent have sapped its capacity for internal debate. Movement conservatives, who work disproportionately for Beltway publications and policy institutes, do not have a real social base. Their movement came to power partly by burying an older, anti-welfare state Right that had in fact enjoyed a social following concentrated in small town America. The newcomers played down the merits of those they had replaced and in the 1980's the neoconservatives, who took over the postwar conservative movement from an earlier generation, belittled their predecessors in a similar way. Among the movement's major accomplishments has been a recreation of its own past. The success of this revised history lies in the fact that even the movement's critics are now inclined to accept it.