Can We Start Talking About the Libertarian *Era* Already?

Nick Gillespie  |  Aug. 20, 2013 1:30 pm

If you read the weekend papers, you already know this much: *Libertarians* are the new black.

Indeed, based on the recent and ongoing coverage, there's a strong case to be made that we're smack dab in the "The Libertarian Moment" that Matt Welch and I - and others at Reason and beyond - have been trumpeting since at least 2008. As Welch's and my December 2008 essay in Reason magazine prophesied, "Despite all leading indicators to the contrary, America is poised to enter a new age of freedom."

What a silly, stupid, idea that seemed, especially when we first trumpeted it (we've kept all the emails telling us to get off the drugs - or at least to share them already). Could the timing have been worse for such a bold affirmation of the "Free Minds and Free Markets" worldview Reason touts across all its platforms? You remember the end of 2008, don't you? The Bush admin, already a record-setter when it came to spending, debt, and regulations (yes, it's all true) spent its final, desperate days in office destroying free-market capitalism in order to save it by pushing through TARP and illegal auto-company bailouts.

A new president was elected who promised an even more interventionist economic policy (and was simply playing coy about his equally interventionist foreign policy). Barack Obama was already plumping for the mother of all stimulus packages, and the only question was whether his awful, transformative healthcare entitlement would be more Canadian than British in accent. What have we learned over the past half-decade or so of hope and change? That Obama - who said he'd run the most transparent and clean-smelling White House operation ever - is even worse on civil liberties and constitutional restraints than George W. Bush (who, if memory serves, was worse than Hitler).

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Yet from listening to NPR and reading the Wash Post and *The Atlantic* over the past few days, you’d think the Libertarian Moment has more upside potential than the national debt (which is, at least theoretically, subject to limitation). Indeed, *The Atlantic* proclaims "America’s Libertarian Moment" in the form of a long and insightful interview with the Cato Institute's David Boaz. Boaz sketches out some of the reasons why libertarianism - imperfectly but usefully summarized as being fiscally conservative and socially liberal - is on the upswing:

The end of the Bush years and the beginning of the Obama years really lit a fire under the always-simmering small-government attitudes in America. The TARP, the bailouts, the stimulus, Obamacare, all of that sort of inspired the Tea Party. Meanwhile, you've simultaneously got libertarian movements going on in regard to gay marriage and marijuana. And I'll tell you something else that I think is always there. The national media were convinced that we would be getting a gun-control bill this year, that surely the Newtown shooting would overcome the general American belief in the Second Amendment right to bear arms. And then they pushed on the string and it didn't go anywhere. Support for gun control is lower today than it was 10 or 15 years ago. I think that's another sign of America's innate libertarianism.

This year you have a whole series of scandals that at least call into question the efficacy, competence, and trustworthiness of government. The IRS, maybe the *Benghazi cover-up*, and the revelations about surveillance. All of those things together, I think, have lit a fire to the smoldering libertarianism of the American electorate.

Over at NPR, Don Gonyea reports that "Amid Struggle for 'Soul' of GOP, Libertarians Take Limelight." Rep. Justin Amash (R-Mich.) explains,

Members of Congress who are on the more libertarian side - and it's a pretty large group now - are tired of the wars that go on overseas, think that we shouldn't be in Afghanistan, want us to bring our troops home from across the globe. And young people really represent that strain of thought. They've seen these wars go on for years with no end. And they'd like to see some peace. They'd like to see us return to some normalcy...

In the Wash Post, Chris Cillizza paints the future of the Republican Part explicitly as a war between a libertarian Rand Paul wing and a mainstream, establishment Chris Christie wing. He writes,
The battle between the two men will be all the more intriguing because it is really a de facto fight for what Republicans have learned from the past two presidential elections and what they believe is the solution to their problem. Did Republicans lose to Barack Obama twice because they nominated establishment Republicans who didn’t excite the party’s base? Or did they lose because many within the party demanded absolute fealty to core principles at the detriment of winning votes from the middle of the ideological spectrum?

This is the wrong way to phrase the question for at least a couple of reasons. First, the question Republicans need to wrassle with isn’t simply about the past two presidential elections but the past four. Until the GOP groks what a full-out disaster George Bush was in terms of spending, regulations, foreign policy, and entitlement expansion, there can be no learning on its part. Cillizza’s framing also presumes that Rand Paul - because he is ideological and at the very least a libertarian fellow-traveler - is incapable of appealing to the "middle of the ideological spectrum." But John McCain and Mitt Romney didn't lose because they swore fealty to the retrograde conservatives that control the GOP. They lost because they were unexciting and because they had no core governing philosophy (or at least one they bothered to articulate or could show from their political lives). Did they offer a coherent or at least compelling vision of the future? Not even their family members could pretend they did.

Recall that McCain suspended his campaign to rush back to DC to vote for TARP. Given that Obama was also voting for TARP, why the rush? McCain's reflexive war-mongering is derived more from blood-sugar spikes than any thought-through foreign policy vision and, as important, it allowed Obama to passively paint himself as the anti-war candidate (despite not being one, as evidenced by his admin's desperate attempts to overstay our welcomes in Iraq and Afghanistan and unconstitutional deployment of force in Libya). McCain's great policy flip-flop came on immigration. He'd long defended an inclusive set of policies which he dumped overnight in one of the most blatant instances of panicked pandering in recent years (watch this and weep for your country). But the real damage was less about the policy topic itself and what it said about McCain: He was a man without strong convictions, except for the one about him deserving to be president. Mitt Romney was another ideological cipher for the most part who was running more for "consultant in chief" than president. Even before he wrote off 47 percent of the electorate (even there, he was no good at predictions), he was effectively toast because his signature achievement as governor of Massachusetts was exactly what Obama had accomplished. That Romney could not articulate exactly what was different about his health care reform and Obama's - or even acknowledge that we would tear up the latter's root and branch (remember, he wanted to keep the parts he liked”) showed independent voters all they needed to know.
The growing libertarian wing of the Republican Party surely does have some core principles on which they will not (and should not) compromise. Chief among them is a serious commitment to reducing the size, scope, and spending of the federal government. The libertarian wing is not simply antagonistic to the surveillance state, the garrison state, and America as globo-cop; it is leading the charge against such things. The libertarian GOPers speak differently than old-school conservatives and even establishment Republicans.

"We need to be white, we need to be brown, we need to be black, we need to be with tattoos, without tattoos, with pony tails, without pony tails, with beards, without," Rand Paul told a New Hampshire audience earlier this year. He's no hippie, that's for sure, but at his best moments, he knows what America looks like and wants to be part of its future. That means embracing the diversity you see shopping the aisles of Walmart, where goth crosses on UFC paraphernalia and once-forbidden AC/DC CDs fill the discount bins.

"If you allow people to make their own decisions, you actually get good outcomes for society," Justin Amash told me earlier this year. As an observant Orthodox Christian, he's no fan of same-sex marriage, but his response to recent Supreme Court rulings sanctioning the practice is something most of us can live with: "Marriage is a private institution that government should not define. To me and millions of Americans, marriage is also a religious sacrament that needs no government approval.... I will continue to push for less government interference in our personal and economic affairs."

These are very different sensibilities and principles than those of the status-quo conservative wing of the party, which is dedicated to increasing spending on defense and other favored constituencies (such as Medicare beneficiaries and farmers in the form of subsidies) and to running off at the mouth about immigrants (at least if they come from south of the border), the gays, and abortion. That establishment GOP pols talk more about the last three topics rather than things such as entitlements, spending, and overseas war is a sign they are not serious when it comes to governing. Cillizza and others are probably right that a dedication to crusty old conservative values will not ever again win national elections. Especially if those values seem to long for the good old days of closeted gays, immigrants from the slums of Southern and Central Europe, a blank check for seniors (and nothing but aspersions for seniors), and a willingness to bear any burden in the fight against international communism (news flash: we won that battle!). But that's not what is getting people hopped up about libertarians these days. What does it tell you that observers from George Will to Julian Assange are swooning for the libertarian Republicans? As Assange put it recently, he is "a big admirer of Ron Paul and Rand Paul for their
very principled positions in the US Congress on a number of issues...[and] the libertarian aspect of the Republican Party is presently the only useful political voice in the US Congress."

It's worth noting that Chris Christie's latest round of press came about only because he bashed "this strain of libertarianism that's going through both parties right now and making big headlines." That tells you something about what's on the rise and what isn't (so do attacks on Rand Paul from National Review types who sniff that a guy calling for smaller government "doesn't offer much to conservatives." Christie called libertarianism "a very dangerous thing" because...because...because...9/11? Hurricane Sandy aid (which ended up coming in droves to the affected areas and being deployed with exactly the same inefficiencies as disaster aid always does)? Because as a former prosecutor, Christie doesn't give a fig about civil liberties and, as a foreign-policy naif, he blindly follows the leads of the latter-day McNamaras and Bundys cooling their jets at the American Enterprise Institute and The Weekly Standard?

In a way that standard-issue Republican conservatives, including folks such as Christie (who has increased spending each year in office), and even most Democrats can't, the libertarian Republicans are embracing the ongoing shift to a looser, more decentralized America. The libertarians can make peace with the too-long-delayed acceptance of marriage equality, marijuana legalization (Rand Paul is pushing sentencing reform and has argued that drug laws should be state matters), and they can articulate a vision of open borders that encompass the free movement of goods and people ("We will find a place for you," Paul has said of illegal immigrants).

In this, it's worth stressing, the libertarian Republicans are not leading but following public opinion. A majority of people think government has long been doing too much and they want less spending. A plurality wants to see more independents in national office. However many parties there are, the ideological duopoly is in its dying days.

Pols following the public's lead is precisely how it always plays out and one of the reasons that the Libertarian Moment is upon us. As Matt Welch and I argued in 2008 - and later in our 2011 book The Declaration of Independents - politics is a lagging indicator of American society:

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It's wrong to look at politics as anything other than the B.A. Baracus of American society, the last one through the door and the last member of The A-Team to get the joke. And a simple study of incentives will tell you that political parties will use whatever is at their disposal to stay in power, particularly the government they control. Expecting Washington to cut back...
its main instrument of power after a capitalism-bashing political campaign is like expecting Michael Moore to share his Egg McMuffin with a homeless man.

But when the gap grows too wide between voter desire and government policy, between the way people actually live their lives and the way government wants them to behave, then a situation that looks stable can turn revolutionary overnight. Richard Nixon may have been sitting pretty in 1971, but he was sent packing to San Clemente by 1974.

After a dozen years of expanding government at every possible level across every possible front and a seemingly endless series of new and ever-more furshlugger policies large and small (Medicare expansions, No Child Left Behind, TARP, stimulus, NSA surveillance, soda bans, cheese bans, you name it), there are real victories for libertarian themes on the drug and lifestyle fronts, real per-capita federal spending has flattened (though not for lack of trying to jack it up), and there's widespread and growing dissatisfaction with a DC crew that seems forever out to lunch when it comes to everything (some polls have Congress’ approval rating in the single digits; Obama's disapproval rating hovers near its all-time high). Affiliation with two major political parties continue to sag like network ratings and self-described Independents are a large plurality, comprising 43 percent of respondents in a recent Gallup survey.

Far more important - and far away from the muddy field of politics - ongoing experiments in living proceed apace, with individuals, communities, and entrepreneurs plowing ahead with new and different ways of getting on with their big thing. Amazon.com founder (and Reason Foundation donor) Jeff Bezos buys the Washington Post, experimenters unveil vat-grown beef, thousands flock to Burning Man, and more kids attend schools of choice (public, private, nonprofit) than have in decades. In a world you can get an infinite number of drinks at Starbucks and a dozen or more strains of weed at your local medical marijuana dispensary (the very ones Obama has raided like a drug-war Republican), choosing between column A and column B just doesn't cut it anymore.

If the long-term, decentralist trends described in books as different as Moises Naim's The End of Power, Grant McCracken's Plenitude, and The Declaration of Independents are at all true, we can forget about the Libertarian Moment and start jawing about the Libertarian Era. At least it will give the legacy media something to fill their pages while they're still around.

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