

BOOK REVIEWS

Kill or Capture: The War on Terror and the Soul of the Obama Presidency

Daniel Klaidman

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The Republican Party at least has the decency not to get its civil libertarian supporters' hopes up. Bemused tolerance and the odd Ron Paul appearance are about all the encouragement they get. Democratic civil libertarians, by contrast, suffer from relevance. Like other interests large enough to matter in primary elections but loyal enough to betray later, they are seduced and then scorned, especially by presidents. Their disappointment is harsher because it is less expected.

Senator Barack Obama was well-suited to secure the triumph of liberal hope over that experience. One reason was his identity: urban black constitutional law teachers with Ivy-league pedigrees seem unlikely exponents of state policing and military power. Along with revulsion at the outgoing administration, that identity was enough to get the ACLU part of the base in Jerry Maguire mode ("you had me at hello"). But there was substance too: Obama's denunciation of the Iraq War, the Guantanamo Bay prison (Gitmo), coercive interrogation methods, and the Bush administration's "color-coded politics of fear."

Kill or Capture: The War on Terror and the Soul of Obama Presidency, by journalist Daniel Klaidman, partly explains how the Obama administration has dashed civil libertarians' expectations. The title misleads in two ways. First, though the book touches on various

counterterrorism policies, two predominate: (1) the administration's expansion of drone strikes in Pakistan, Yemen, and Somalia; and (2) its effort, abandoned in the face of congressional opposition, to close Gitmo and to release or try the suspected terrorists there in civilian court. Second, the book shows that the White House was not willing to run much political risk in these areas. Its soul was elsewhere.

Before turning to Klaidman's treatment of those choices, it is worth putting them in the context of Obama's overall national security policies. Even when he took office, there was ample evidence that his dovish positions would not outlast their political convenience. He had already reversed himself on the Bush administration's National Security Agency warrantless surveillance program, having voted in the Senate to legalize the program and shield telecommunications companies from liability for facilitating it. Obama's position on Iraq had not been risky when he took it as an Illinois state senator, and it proved essential to winning the Democratic nomination over Hillary Clinton. He never complained about fighting endless wars of occupation in the name of counterterrorism. He argued rather that Iraq had taken attention and resources from that sort of war in Afghanistan. His positions on Gitmo and interrogation were mainstream; John McCain's were similar. Obama's vice president, secretary of state, and most of his national security appointees had hawkish records.

As Dick Cheney has gleefully noted, President Obama's counterterrorism policies have mostly continued the Bush administration's. In several areas, this White House has proven more aggressive. Obama repeatedly signed extensions of the PATRIOT Act. The Obama Department of Justice still avails itself of the States Secrets privilege to block lawsuits that might expose things it wants hidden. Justice decided against both prosecuting CIA interrogators that used coercive interrogation tactics with the Bush administration's dubious legal sanction and indicting anyone for the deaths of several prisoners in Iraq and Afghanistan seemingly as a result of unsanctioned interrogation methods.

In number and location, President Obama has greatly expanded drone strikes. His lawyers repeat the Bush administration's claim that the authorization of military force passed in 2001, where Congress legalized war against the organizers of the September 11 attacks and those who harbored them, has no geographic or temporal limit and allows the military to kill or indefinitely detain anyone the president

wants, including U.S. citizens. The administration refuses to release legal documents explaining how it decides whom it so targets. Last December, Obama signed a defense bill affirming these powers. In response to complaints that they violate U.S. citizens' constitutionally guaranteed due process rights, Attorney General Holder argued last spring that executive branch deliberations themselves satisfy due process requirements, and so no courts are needed—a claim so offensive to constitutional history that even John Yoo never made it.

The Obama administration massively expanded the war in Afghanistan, sold the expansion with the sort of terrorism threat inflation that candidate Obama attacked, and plans to keep troops there indefinitely (the “withdrawal” date begins a process that they have no plan to complete). In Libya, Obama did something Bush never did: overtly attack a country without asking Congress for permission or even funding. The administration explained that the U.S. aircraft bombing things there were not engaged in war but in a “kinetic military action,” a neologism invented to evade the War Powers Act.

Obama's anti-war decisions were largely inherited. The administration removed U.S. troops from Iraq on a schedule that the Bush administration negotiated. Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta says that war was worthwhile and suggests permanently stationing tens of thousands of U.S. troops in the region. Like Bush, Obama says an Iran with nuclear weapons is intolerable and that all U.S. options are on the table but seems disinclined to bomb.

Obama's jilted dovish supporters may take some comfort from *Kill or Capture*. It suggests that this record results from the president sacrificing his true desires for political expedience and that a second term might improve matters. Klaidman calls the president a “civil libertarian by instinct” and claims that his opposition to Bush's fear-mongering was heartfelt. Obama is said to worry about how a Republican president will use the war powers he established. He apparently gave in on Gitmo largely at behest of his political aides, especially former White House chief of staff Rahm Emanuel, who believed that civilian trials for terrorism suspects were an electoral loser and a drain of political capital needed especially for health care reform. The president's enthusiasm for drone strikes appears more genuine, but there too electoral politics—the opportunity to look tough—pushed him in a hawkish direction.

Kill or Capture is clear and readable but suffers flaws typical of journalistic histories. For one, it seems somewhat skewed by its sources. We hear a lot about what Justice Department lawyers and White House political operatives thought but little about machinations in Congress, the National Security staff, and the Office of the Secretary of Defense. It seems that Klaidman focuses the narrative where his access was best.

Klaidman's best sources appear eager to show that White House politicians got the president to give up his civil libertarian convictions too easily. Klaidman, who does not include footnotes, says that he interviewed more than 200 people for the book. But the two that seem most valuable—former White House counsel Greg Craig and Holder—repeatedly took the civil liberties side in fights with White House staff, especially Emmanuel. They led the increasingly quixotic effort to close Gitmo and end the military tribunals for suspected terrorists. Craig, by Klaidman's account, was essentially fired, and Holder seems likely to leave office, one way or another, in the next year. Klaidman reports that both Craig and Holder believe that Emmanuel, by "playing footsie" with South Carolina Senator Lindsey Graham in the hopes of cutting a grand bargain of detainee matters, had "subcontracted" a key national security policy to a political opponent who could not even deliver Republican votes. Holder is also said to suspect that Emmanuel worked with Republicans against the administration's attempts to try Muhammed in Manhattan. Klaidman, perhaps channeling these sources, argues that the president's eagerness to compromise with Republicans only encouraged them to attack him more.

That last point is about all the evaluation Klaidman provides. Otherwise he relays the White House's political judgments without interrogation. That is an understandable journalistic practice but still intellectually unsatisfying. Klaidman might at least have asked whether the tradeoffs between political gain and principle were really so sharp. A vast political science literature tells us that most of the time, the public barely knows or cares what happens with these issues and that partisan battle cries tend to excite mostly already-committed partisans. The president may have more discretion here than it seems.

There is a larger problem with *Kill or Capture*'s story of betrayal, one that, to be fair, is hardly unique to this book. That is the futility of the search for true beliefs beneath elected leaders' political

shrouds. Because political leadership, especially of a large democracy, is an enterprise uniquely dominated by the imperative to gather support, other experiences tell us little about how leaders will navigate their values once in office. When it comes to their presidential behavior, what Barack Obama or Mitt Romney believes independent of their electoral ambitions is an interesting but mostly academic question. Far more important are their priorities—what they are willing to sacrifice for their preferences. That is revealed by their behavior as elected leaders and candidates.

So whether or not Obama is a civil libertarian by instinct—I'd say he is a politician by instinct—is basically irrelevant. Whatever his instincts, his record shows that he is not willing to risk much of anything for civil liberties and, on national security issues, goes where the prevailing political winds blow. That is why this administration's security policies resemble Bush's, which is the general pattern in our country. A second term might give Obama more freedom to defy political wisdom, but it seems unlikely to matter much. Richard Neustadt's argument that presidential popularity translates into presidential power suggests that even second-term presidents will avoid unpopular moves to horde political capital for their top priorities. And Obama's do not seem to lie in the civil liberties arena.

The president's political opportunism should not be surprising or upsetting. Democracy, by design, weeds out candidates that sacrifice political well-being for conscience, generally well before they get a sniff of the presidency. National security is no exception. The scores of pundits and politicians that annually insist otherwise—that national security should not be political—reliably fail to propose a set of platonic guardians qualified to run things without a democratic check. Ward-heeler types seem to me preferable to either party's foreign policy elite.

We get the presidents that our politics make. Those upset by Obama's record on war and civil liberties (that includes me) should abandon hope that he will deliver their agenda by escaping political restraints and, instead, focus on improving their own agenda. Because the political stakes are generally low, more organized pressure may swing the White House toward civil liberties here and there. We are, after all, the ones we've been waiting for.

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Knowledge and Cooperation: A Liberal Interpretation

Daniel B. Klein

New York: Oxford University Press, 2012, 351 pp.

Daniel B. Klein's fascinating exposition of the case for limited government argues that understanding of the complexity of knowledge and its use to coordinate human actions indicates the impossibility of successful interventions by governments. His basic point is that knowledge is not simply something that always can be purchased on the open market and readily employed. People may create the knowledge that they utilize, and it always must be interpreted properly. Intervention kills such initiatives.

With cooperation, Klein distinguishes concatenate coordination (a somewhat awkward term) and mutual coordination. A better distinction might have been between active and passive coordination. Concatenate coordination seeks to produce something innovative; mutual coordination merely sets ground rules for activities already being undertaken. Running a firm is concatenate coordination; deciding about the side of the road on which everyone is to drive is mutual coordination. Given that Klein is a believer in the superiority of a spontaneous market order, he further argues that that market order produces concatenate coordination.

Klein's acknowledgements indicate that the bulk of the work derives from previously published works, but the book is far more coherent than the usual anthology. Nevertheless, some material of lesser interest remains. The text begins with a parable about a roller-skating rink. Such a rink illustrates how separate private actions achieve coordination that no planner could attain. The next chapter outlines his arguments about the nature of knowledge and the importance of economic freedom in acquiring it.

Next comes Klein's intellectual autobiography. He begins telling how as an underperforming 13-year-old from a left-leaning household in New Jersey, he was pointed toward his libertarian outlook by a friend who told him that school was boring because the government ran it. Klein later enrolled in an Austrian economics program at Rutgers-Newark and moved with the program to George Mason University. Graduate work at New York University followed, where he pursued more standard studies but also worked with Israel Kirzner. The resulting intellectual development confirmed his rejection of "mainstream" economics and fostered preferences among key

exponents of libertarian economics. He became disenchanted with the rigidities of von Mises and Rothbard, maintained a qualified admiration for Kirzner, was strongly influenced by D. N. McCloskey, and became a fervent admirer of Adam Smith and Friedrich Hayek. Klein's concerns about Kirzner and response to Smith are major elements of the book.

Klein then more fully develops his distinction between concatenate and mutual cooperation. He indicates that the scope of concatenate cooperation was extended beyond the conscious efforts of managers of firms to the coordination by a spontaneous market order. His literature review indicates that scholars solely attended to concatenate cooperation until the rise of game theory, in which mutual cooperation became the dominant interest. Klein concludes that cooperation, not efficiency, better defines the desirable outcome of free markets. For Klein the limits of knowledge indicate that only a loose concept like cooperation fits the spontaneous market order.

In chapter 5, Klein contrasts concatenate thinkers (Adam Smith, Hayek, and Ronald Coase) to those who focused on cooperation (primarily Carl Menger). It is here that Klein most fully develops the point that Hayek, Michael Polanyi, and Coase established that market order is concatenate coordination. This leads to the argument that a spontaneous market order produces the most pleasing possible outcome. He then usefully further discusses the two types of coordination, leading to a typology of outcomes. His brief chapter 6 starts with further arguments for the superiority of spontaneous order and ends with approving comments on Kirzner's stress on how that order fosters discovery.

Then chapter 7 is devoted to evaluating more fully Kirzner's arguments. Klein starts with a summary of Kirzner's views, discusses some unfavorable reviews of Kirzner, and then notes Kirzner's response. Klein introduces MIT artificial intelligence scholar Marvin Minsky's concepts of the mind as a way to clarify Kirzner's arguments. Minsky argues the mind is made up of many parts, which may not always with connect with each other. An epiphany is needed to produce links. Klein then treats failures to act correctly; he introduces the avowedly artificial distinction between easily correctable mistakes and more problematic errors requiring more fundamental responses. He also examines the role of regret in decisionmaking. Klein supports Kirzner's view that liberty is essential to entrepreneurship. Returning to entrepreneurship, he correctly argues that

most treatments tell only part of the story and their insights should be combined. He devotes much attention to dealing with how to credit an idea conceived by one person and implemented by a second person to whom the first conveyed the idea. He goes on to the more important issues of whether innovations are discovered or imagined, how important is ownership, and the need for supporting rhetoric. Here Klein suggests Kirzner's critics are correct in noting innovation can be created rather than just found and needs support by secure property rights.

In the next chapter, he deplores the "flattening" of knowledge into information. Klein contends that this flattening means replacing recognition of Hayek's knowledge problem with a faith in intervention. Klein first suggests that George Stigler's work on information contributed to the flattening, thus undermining the free-market principles Stigler supported. Klein then criticizes interventionist writers. His prime target is appropriately Kenneth Arrow, who routinely advocates statist solutions without undertaking serious study of related practical problems.

The next part of the book usefully presents various applications of his arguments. First, he develops the case that property rights in roads would be superior to prevailing public intervention for developing transportation options. He then turns to why private development of assurance about commodities and their suppliers is superior to public provision. Finally, he contends that technological advance increases rather than diminishes the case for free markets. Such advances are available to private as well as public actors. The new technologies, moreover, may eliminate the problem of operating a market.

Chapter 14 is the trickiest portion of the book. Klein further develops his allegory of a central authority arranging society, whom he calls "Joy," and identifies Joy with Adam Smith's impartial spectator in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. Klein believes that the allegory helps convey the moral superiority of a spontaneous market order over intervention. He turns to the problem of dealing with private decisions that eventually prove wrong. The resulting six-page discussion seemed too compressed. He inconsistently applies his stress on making distinctions. He agonizes over Kirzner's argument that all entrepreneurial opportunities arise from prior error and Kirzner's use of the failure by buggy makers to anticipate the rise of the automobile as an example. My reaction is that Kirzner is using a

bizarre, overly broad definition of error. Klein suggests this conclusion but proceeds to talk of Joy making an error. However, this proves largely a hint of the extensive critique of Kirzner that comprises chapter 16. Finally, and most convincingly, he uses the classic example of the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) to indicate that the difference between private and public incentives, and the presence and absence of market pressure, leads to defective public action.

The conclusion of the main text in chapter 15 begins by noting the neglect for many decades of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* despite Smith's high regard for the book. Klein then argues that his book properly conveys Smith's view of a proper society. Klein's final claim is that an earlier acceptance of an allegorical defense of liberalism would have helped stem the rise of social democracy.

The book concludes with a three-part appendix. Chapter 16, which is predominantly from a previously published paper in the *Journal of Private Enterprise* coauthored with Jason Bruggeman, comprises the vast majority of the appendix. The Kirzner chapter is followed by a chapter containing four short pieces by Klein and then quotations of Michael Polanyi.

The treatment of Kirzner starts by endorsing his basic view that entrepreneurship enhances coordination but then contends that Kirzner is guilty of overstating his arguments. Kirzner claims only entrepreneurship produces coordination, and entrepreneurship is always error correction. Failure to anticipate good ideas produces regret and disappointment. Klein and Bruggeman also note that undesirable outcomes can be profitable. In most cases, Kirzner can be correct only by torturous redefinition of concepts. However, the Klein-Bruggeman list of undesirable successes includes the doubtful examples of firms that successfully mislead (a concern that Klein's main text seemed to undermine effectively) and lock-ins, a great urban legend. However, a key central concern is of Kirzner's apparent acceptance of the Mises-Rothbard view that the arguments are objective and value free. The chapter seems an addendum of highly specialized interest. Skimming the commentary on the original article reinforces concerns that the discussion is mired in intractable terminological issues.

The book's vigorous advocacy of the inherent limitation of individual knowledge implies that no critic can *definitively* assess the validity of the argument. This, however, also applies to Klein's

pronouncements on prior writers. Klein's standards suggest that his complaints about others are too conclusive. In particular, his discussion indicates the fuzziness of all terminology, and, thus, Klein is too sure about the undesirability or desirability of different concepts. In addition, his strictures against pretensions of scientific objectivity can extend toward any purely abstract treatment of the issues. Coming as I do from learning to abhor intervention by continuously examining its practical failure, I stress the key role of observation on policy outlook. Anyone exposed to political practice cannot reject a limited government outlook.

My view leads to a quarrel with Klein on specifics. First, I agree with his distaste for Mises's methodological claims but for a different reason. Mises's claims are arrant nonsense as either standalone advice or a description of what Mises actually does. Very little in Mises qualifies as analysis in even the loosest possible sense. Despite his stated distain for empirical work, Mises largely observes and evaluates reality. The keenness of his observation is what makes him persist. Conversely, Klein stops short of noting how Rothbard responded to his failure to secure acclaim by excoriating all who differed and often adopted outrageous positions (such as opposition to tax simplification) to score points.

This leads to a second disagreement. Klein's treatment of Stigler as using misguided methodology to support free markets is overdone. Stigler in 1956 stated the key role of empirical work in resolving the ambiguities of theoretical results (albeit while chiding Mises for his stated distain for empiricism but not recognizing how much of Mises's practice was quirky empirical observation). More critically, Stigler warned about the difficulties of securing political support for sound economics. Klein's observations about how the structure of the FDA makes socially undesirable outcome optimal for FDA officials is very Stiglerian.

Finally, on a minor note, Klein makes several references to the lock-in of inappropriate technologies without seriously commenting. In the course of the Microsoft antitrust case, concern over lock-in was central. A critical counter was the work of Stan J. Liebowitz and Stephen E. Margolis. In a series of articles and a book, the two showed the claimed lock-ins of inferior technologies were invalid and argued, quite correctly as it turned out, that the rise of Microsoft's Internet Explorer would not cause an undesirable lock-in. Operating-system-linked browsers live in coexistence

with standalone versions. (Indeed, the linked browsers have standalone variants.)

Overall, the book is a fresh, rewarding look at the fundamentals of liberalism. Clearly, the premises of the book imply that it and any alternative effort cannot be definitive. The essence of a spontaneous market order is that it is too complicated for any one author to comprehend. A book on the order thus must be incomplete. The best that is possible is that new insights are provided into the issues. Klein succeeds admirably at that. His elucidation of the complexities of knowledge is a valuable addition to the literature. His effort to provide a moral justification for free markets is an impressive advance. Those interested in sound government will greatly benefit from the book. It probably too densely argued to be an ideal start, but it is a deserving addition to the armory of limited-government economics.

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The Case for Polarized Politics: Why America Needs Social Conservatism

Jeffrey Bell

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It might seem odd that, in a time when political pundits routinely condemn the rampant if not unprecedented polarization in American politics, one writer would try to make the case that polarized politics is a good thing, but that is indeed what former Reagan advisor Jeffrey Bell attempts in *The Case for Polarized Politics: Why America Needs Social Conservatism*. His arguments to justify an outspoken social conservatism as necessary to both the success of the Republican Party and the long-term success of what he calls “American exceptionalism,” however, fall short on several levels.

Bell argues that “social conservatism is not only unlikely to collapse, but that it is becoming increasingly unified and coherent.” He believes that if Republican Party elites attempt to sideline the social conservative movement, as he maintains they often have, the GOP’s future could be bleak. He recites the impact that social conservatives have had on the political success of the Republican Party, particularly in the 1980s, when it brought in millions of former Democrats disappointed by President Carter’s 1978 decision to

revoke the tax exempt status of the so-called Christian academies then popular throughout the South. Whereas Jimmy Carter had received the support of 60 to 65 percent of Bible-believing white Protestants in 1976, according to Bell, by 1980, Republican candidate Ronald Reagan won the great majority of these same voters, based on a panoply of social issues of the time (from growing crime to school busing to prayer in the public schools to today's more familiar terrain of abortion and gay rights).

His recognition of these voters' contribution to Reagan's electoral success is understandable, but Bell never acknowledges the seismic shifts in cultural values that have taken place since then, not just among voters generally but also among Republicans. In the 1980s, support for gay rights, the one social issue Bell returns to again and again, was relatively low, and support for same-sex marriage was virtually nonexistent. Even as recently as 2004, the last time social conservative voters arguably had a significant impact on the presidential election (this time on behalf of George W. Bush), a large majority of all voters, including Democrats and independents, opposed same-sex marriage rights. According to a CBS News poll from that year, only 28 percent of adults supported same-sex marriage, while 29 percent supported civil unions and fully 40 percent opposed any recognition of gay couples. Among Republicans, support was even lower.

Today's polls, however, show a very different America, as well as a very different Republican Party. According to most polls from the past two years, a modest majority of Americans now supports same-sex marriage, including over 60 percent of Democrats and 57 percent of independents. An even larger majority, around 70 percent, supports either same-sex marriage or civil unions. Support for same-sex marriage among Republicans is, not surprisingly, significantly lower, ranging from the low 20s to nearly 40 percent in a recent *Washington Post/ABC News* poll. But support among Republicans for some kind of legal recognition for gay couples is substantially higher. A Fox News poll from May 2012 showed 57 percent supporting relationship recognition, while a Daily Kos poll from that same month showed 52 percent in support.

The same generational divide we see nationally on this issue also holds true for Republicans. GOP millennials, those ages 18–29, are evenly split on the question: 46 percent in favor, 46 percent opposed. Even among young evangelicals, 43 percent support same-sex marriage. Clearly, this is not your father's Republican Party, and

nearly the entire anti-gay policy agenda advocated by the leading Religious Right organizations—support for a federal marriage amendment, opposition to the Employment Nondiscrimination Act, support for reinstating Don't Ask, Don't Tell—are all opposed by a significant majority of rank and file Republicans, let alone voters at large. (These surveys are documented in my new book, *A Fundamental Freedom: Why Republicans, Conservatives, and Libertarians Should Support Gay Rights*.)

The Christian Right today represents perhaps a fifth of all voters, and even among many of them, there is measured support for gay rights. Pining for a different time, Bell appears to be as culturally out of touch with modern American values as the leaders and members of the Religious Right organizations whose views he shares. His premise that an energized and activist Christian Right is somehow the key to the Republican Party's, and America's, future is simply at odds with America's decreasing religiosity and increasing social tolerance, including homosexuality and other aspects of the modern sexual revolution, making much of Bell's argument oddly out of date. While Bell's belief that social conservatism as a movement "is becoming increasingly unified and coherent" and "driving much of the national debate" in modern politics may be true, its increasingly strident tone and notoriety leads to one inescapable fact: it is losing that debate.

Another reason for that may be the fact that he and his social conservative allies are simply incorrect in their belief that "social conservatism has been the only mass-based political persuasion that fully believes in and defends the core ideas of the American founding." That allegation likely comes as a surprise to the millions of libertarians and mainstream economic conservatives who formed the core of the modern conservative movement at least 50 years ago, who built it from the ground up with little help from evangelicals, who were mostly apolitical or Democrats in the movement's formative years. It is the political descendents of those libertarians and economic conservatives who today account for the newly resurgent libertarian wing of the Republican Party and the growing libertarian sensibilities of many American voters. Bell barely mentions them, and apparently lumps them in with those on the left whom he describes as "social liberals," people who he claims do not believe that the central principle of the Declaration of Independence, "that all men are created equal and endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights," is literally true. For Bell, religious faith and a

belief that all rights flow from God are essential tools if we are to prevent the United States from falling into the abyss of European-style socialism and multiculturalism.

In fact, Bell believes there are really just three modern political movements or philosophies in the world: social conservatism (which he believes is the modern descendent of what he labels the “conservative enlightenment”), the modern Left (in both its cultural and economic manifestations), and the religion of Islam. Only the traditional cultural values that are at the center of Bell’s conservatism can defeat the Left, despite the visible and growing worldwide classical liberal movement and its libertarian and conservative allies in the United States.

To be sure, Bell praises the Tea Party for its fight against President Obama’s economic program, first wondering if the Tea Party might be a potential American rival to social conservatism but then concluding that “in operational terms, there was little tension between the two movements.” With its overwhelming emphasis on economic issues and its strong libertarian elements, however, the Tea Party is clearly not synonymous with social conservatism and its distinct focus on religious and cultural issues. (See the recent study by Emily Ekins and David Kirby, “Libertarian Roots of the Tea Party,” *Cato Policy Analysis* no. 705, September 2012.) There is certainly some overlap between the two movements, but the driving force and ideology behind the Tea Party makes it a movement all its own, distinct from both social conservatism and libertarianism.

Despite Bell’s belief that only social conservatism can lead the American struggle against the Left, the social conservative movement’s primary emphasis on cultural issues has boxed it off from many who share its wider opposition to the modern collectivist state, including those who believe the separation of church and state is a good thing. The social conservative narrative (for example, that the Founding Fathers didn’t really believe in the separation of church and state, a basic tenet of classical liberalism) is simply wrong. While most of the Founders acknowledged the existence of a higher being, a Creator, many (like Thomas Jefferson) were deists who did not believe in conventional Christianity, let alone a state based on biblical commands and interpretations. Indeed, the words Bible, Jesus, Christianity, and God appear nowhere in the Constitution, and many of the Founders’ contemporaries loudly condemned them for creating what they labeled a “Godless” constitution.

Like most classical liberals of the time, the Founders believed that rights flowed from man's nature as a rational being with free will capable of making his own decisions based on his own values. Unfortunately, most modern social conservatives like Bell believe that unless one exercises that free will "correctly"—that is, to fulfill what he and his movement allies believe are one's "obligations and duties to others, and to God"—then one violates the "natural law" that is the very source of those rights. But letting government define what the "proper" uses of those rights are means they are not rights at all; they become mere privileges that can be withdrawn at the whim of the state. That, surely, is not what most of the Founders had in mind, and certainly those in the resurgent libertarian movement, including many in the Tea Party, would agree.

Contrary to what Bell states, opposition to the faith-based government advocated by social conservatives does not exist just on the left but across the political spectrum, and Mr. Bell would be wise to acknowledge that. For those steeped in classical liberal and libertarian philosophy, Bell's offering of the political options we face is an unsatisfactory one, perhaps best summed up as: choose your poison. Despite this book's useful historical analysis of the philosophical basis of some of the world's most prominent political movements, those looking for a coherent battle plan against the collectivist Left based on a consistent defense of individual liberty in the classical liberal mold will have to look elsewhere.

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