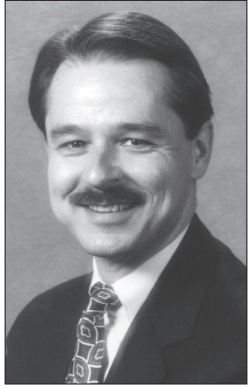


Are Libertarians Anti-Government?



For the past several years, especially since the Oklahoma City bombing, the national media have focused a lot of attention on “anti-government” extremists. Libertarians, who are critical of a great deal that government does, have unfortunately but perhaps understandably been tossed into the “anti-government” camp by many journalists.

There are two problems with this identification. The first and most obvious is that many of the so-called anti-government groups are racist or violent or both,

and being identified with them verges on libel.

The second and ultimately more important problem is that libertarians are not, in any serious sense, “anti-government.” It’s understandable that journalists might refer to people who often criticize both incumbent officeholders and government programs as “anti-government,” but the term is misleading.

A government is a set of institutions through which we adjudicate our disputes, defend our rights, and provide for certain common needs. It derives its authority, at some level and in some way, from the consent of the governed.

Libertarians want people to be able to live peacefully together in civil society. Cooperation is better than coercion. Peaceful coexistence and voluntary cooperation require an institution to protect us from outside threats, deter or punish criminals, and settle the disputes that will inevitably arise among neighbors—

a government, in short. Thus, to criticize a wide range of the activities undertaken by federal and state governments—from Social Security to drug prohibition to out-of-control taxation—is not to be “anti-government.” It is simply to insist that what we want is a limited government that attends to its necessary and proper functions.

But if libertarians are not “anti-government,” then how do we describe the kind of government that libertarians support? One formulation found in the media is that “libertarians support weak government.” That has a certain appeal. But consider a prominent case of “weak government.” Numerous reports have told us recently about the weakness of the Russian government. Not only does it have trouble raising taxes and paying its still numerous employees, it has trouble deterring or punishing criminals. It is in fact too weak to carry out its legitimate functions. The Russian government is a failure on two counts: it is massive, clumsy, overextended, and virtually unconstrained in scope, yet too weak to perform its essential job. (Residents of many American cities may find that description a bit too close for comfort.)

Not “weak government,” then. How about “small government”?

Lots of people, including many libertarians, like that phrase to describe libertarian views. And it has a certain plausibility. We rail against “big government,” so we must prefer small government, or “less government.” Of course, we wouldn’t want a government too small to deter military threats or apprehend criminals. And *Washington Post* columnist E. J. Dionne, Jr., offers us this comparison: “a dictatorship in which the government provides no social security, health, welfare or pension programs of any kind” and “levies relatively low taxes that go almost entirely toward the support of large military and secret police forces that regularly kill or jail people for their political or religious views” or “a democracy with open elections and full freedom of speech and religion [which] levies higher taxes than the dictatorship to support an extensive welfare state.”

“The first country might technically have a ‘smaller government,’” Dionne writes, “but it undoubtedly is *not* a free society. The second country would have a ‘bigger government,’ but it *is* indeed a free society.”

Now there are several problems with this comparison, not least Dionne’s apparent view that high taxes don’t limit the freedom

of those forced to pay them. But our concern here is the term “smaller government.” Measured as a percentage of GDP or by the number of employees, the second government may well be larger than the first. Measured by its power and control over individuals and society, however, the first government is doubtless larger. Thus, as long as the term is properly understood, it’s reasonable for libertarians to endorse “smaller government.” But Dionne’s criticism should remind us that the term may not be well understood.

So if we’re not anti-government, and not really for weak or small government,

how should we describe the libertarian position? To answer that question, we need to go back to the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. Libertarians generally support a government formed by the consent of the governed and designed to achieve certain limited purposes. Both the form of government and the limits on its powers should be specified in a constitution, and the challenge in any society is to keep government constrained and limited so that individuals can prosper and solve problems in a free and civil society.

Thus libertarians are not “anti-government.” Libertarians support limited, constitutional government—limited not just in size but, of far greater importance, in the scope of its powers.

“The challenge is to keep government constrained and limited so that individuals can prosper and solve problems in a free and civil society.”

—David Boaz