

Wartime and Family Time

BY P. J. O'ROURKE

TERRORISM IS A FREE MARKET IN COERCION. Although libertarians admire markets, this one should be razed, its stalls and pushcarts burned, its customers scattered, and its merchants hanged. A democratically elected, constitutionally limited government owns a rightful monopoly on force. We don't want privatization of aggression.

Any terrorism is an attack on libertarian values. Nothing could be more disrespectful to the individual than to take him — just as he arrives at work to begin a day of exercising material freedom — and blow him to bits. And the particular terrorists whom we are fighting also want to drag women from their schools and jobs and smother them in the ballroom curtains while sanctifying a rape of a union between church and state.

Libertarians have no choice except to join this war. But war is a collective enterprise. The problem with having a libertarian in a collective enterprise is that he tends to be the one in the bucket brigade who's passing a sieve.

But other people in the brigade cause problems, too. In the enthusiasm of unified purpose and patriotic companionship, they begin to think of the nation as a family. America is not a clan or a pedigree. America is a duly constituted association of free people. We're not married to each other. We're not even dating, as we should have learned from our former president who thought he was the whole country's boyfriend.

It's wonderful that America isn't a family, with 280 million people lined up to use the john in the morning while Sis fools with her hair. Nevertheless, the I'm-telling-mother style of Americanism grows during a war. And more dangerous than full bladders and unbrushed teeth is the paradigm shift. With typical filial ingratitude to breadwinners, our suddenly overgrown ménage believes that the ordinary rules of private enterprise shouldn't apply in wartime. Some people now claim that folks shouldn't make a profit from curing anthrax any more than Mom should charge a nickel for kissing boo-boos, or that folks should cure anthrax for free because they're our fourth cousins three times removed (and pretty far removed, since the corporation that manufactures Cipro is German).

The duty of libertarians is to remind our kith and kin that the laws of supply and demand can't be revoked in a crisis

any more than the Second Law of Thermodynamics can. (Missile-scorched members of the Taliban would like to have that one amended.) But when we do our reminding, we will be about as welcome as we were when we showed up at the bucket brigade with the spaghetti colander.

War expands government powers. The trouble is that, when the war goes away, the government powers do not. The Civil War gave us the draft. Periodically ever since, young men have been shorn of the funny clothes and haircuts of adolescence and decked in the funny clothes and haircuts of the military. World War I produced a permanent shift in government revenue collection from tariffs that penalize consumption to estate and income taxes that punish thrift and success. And New York City rent controls were instituted in response to a housing shortage emergency during World War II.

War diminishes both civil and economic rights. But there are scores of organizations and thousands of advocates devoted to preserving and restoring American civil rights. There is no ACLU for your wallet.

The best that libertarians can do at present is urge moderation on our newfound slew of relatives. OK, America is a family — for the moment. But no matter how much we depend on family in a crisis, we don't want Mom to chose our clothes or Dad to call our boss and give him hell about senior executive compensation packages. Let's turn to the government in bad times. But let us turn to the government only as we would turn, in bad times, to the scotch bottle. It's a help to have it there, but let's not become so well helped that we're staggering and blind. We'll get our pocket picked or wind up subjected to a family intervention.

Perhaps we should direct our energy at promoting economic regulation during the war against terrorism — promoting very bad economic regulation in order to ensure a post-war tide of revulsion against all economic regulation. I advocate the federalization of airport security through universal conscription into the Airport Security Corps. I want rationing of movie tickets to *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, price caps on the allowance of teenage girls, military expropriation of any SUV not proven to have been off-road in the past six months, and emergency conservation of graphite reserves by immediate reduction of all golf club shafts to half-length.

American harmony will be preserved. Everyone in the family will be in full agreement about that kind of economic regulation.

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