

Plumb-Line Libertarianism: A Critique of Hoppe

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1. Introduction

It is one thing to make temporary strategic alliances with the forces of either left or right. This may properly be done for several reasons. One reason is to try to convert them to the one true faith. In doing so we say to the leftist: You favor freedom for pot smoking, so how about gold owning? Both, not just the one freedom you favor in this case, can be derived from the “humanistic” principles you ostensibly, but not consistently enough, favor. Similarly, we say to the denizens of the right: You oppose government restrictions such as the minimum wage and rent control, so how about applying the very same philosophical principles which lead you to these conclusions to freedom for homosexuals to engage in consensual adult behavior on the very private property to which you pay lip service?

Similarly, it is entirely appropriate, and fully consistent with libertarianism, to make temporary alliances with left- or right-wingers in order to promote a common interest. Libertarians, for example, may support socialists in their anti-war efforts, or conservatives in their promotion of freedom of association and opposition to enforced affirmative action or coercive unionism. But whatever our purposes in these transitory associations, as libertarians we must always maintain our own identity. Otherwise, all that is unique and vital in this philosophy will be lost. And this would be a tragedy of gigantic proportions, in that this political-economic perspective is that last best hope for mankind, and for his very survival.

In this essay I shall argue for “plumb-line” or pure libertarianism, and take to task a libertarian author who sees some intrinsic connection between libertarianism and conservatism. I contend, in contrast, that while there may well be a case for temporary alliances with those on the right, it is false and misleading to characterize libertarianism as any more closely related to the right than to the left.

The thesis of this essay is that libertarianism must go its own way, philosophically divorced from ideologies of both left and right. In effect I say to both socialists and conservatives: “A pox on both your houses.” As Lew Rockwell states:

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The true friends of freedom, the ones who believe in it as a matter of hard-core principle, are always few. We have been reminded of this in recent days. The much-vaunted civil libertarians of the left can be counted on to defend the rights of every anti-bourgeois segment of society, except when that segment crosses the State to which the left owes its primary loyalty. Thus did these civil libertarians recently see the light on the need to censor and spy on anything the State deems politically deviant. So too with the political right, which sponsors and promotes treatises on the need for traditional morality, isn't at all troubled when the State murders thousands of innocents in the course of a war.¹

2. Plumb-Line Libertarianism

In brief, plumb-line libertarianism is the view that human actions are justified only if they are consistent with private property rights, which are themselves, in turn, defended on the basis of homesteading or voluntary acts such as purchase, gifts, etc.

Plumb-line libertarianism may be defined in terms of pure libertarian principle: It does not compromise this political-economic perspective, not to curry favor with leftists *or* rightists. As stated above, it is entirely consistent with this view to make alliances with advocates of these other views, but the plumb-line libertarian will never confuse his own philosophy with either of these two others.

What is the plumb-line position of libertarianism on libertine acts between consenting adults, such as prostitution, pornography, fornication, gambling, homosexuality, nudism, etc.? Since none of these necessarily involves the use of violence or trespass against private property, all of them should be legal in the full libertarian society.² Does the libertarian have to *favor* such acts? Not at all. He can oppose them, even bitterly, provided only that he does not initiate violence against those who indulge themselves in such a manner.³

3. Strange Bedfellows

Along comes Hans-Hermann Hoppe, the most gifted libertarian theorist now writing, who makes this elementary mistake: He throws his

¹ Lew Rockwell, available online at: <http://www.lewrockwell.com/rockwell/againstliberty.html>.

² Walter Block, *Defending the Undefendable* (New York: Fox and Wilkes, 1991).

³ Walter Block, "Libertarianism vs. Libertinism," *The Journal of Libertarian Studies* 11, no. 1 (1994), pp. 117-28.

(libertarian) lot in with the right, and contends that conservatism is really no different from libertarianism.⁴ He states: "... [C]onservatives today must be antistatist libertarians and equally important, ... libertarians must be conservatives."⁵ Let us address each of these two issues.

a. "... [C]onservatives today must be antistatist libertarians"

I have no doubt that it is possible stipulatively to define conservatism in terms of radical libertarianism. Hoppe attempts this by claiming that "modern conservatism, in the United States and Europe, is confused and distorted."⁶ If so, this leaves room for "real" conservatism, for example, anarcho-capitalism. Then, of course, it logically follows that the two schools of thought are indistinguishable. *Actual* conservatives, however, will always remain very different from libertarians despite these efforts to blur the distinction. It is difficult to see the point of the whole enterprise. Like it or not, the people who now go around parading as conservatives are anything but libertarians. Rather, they are cut-and-dried statist, as Hoppe himself agrees. This search for the will o' the wisp conservatives, in contrast to the real live statist ones with whom we as libertarians must deal, is to engage in jousting with windmills. Even if we find them, why not give them their proper nomenclature, "libertarian," instead of calling them "conservatives," and then trying somehow to shoehorn them into what they are not?

There is no doubt that a gaggle of ex-communists and neo-"conservatives" has taken over the right side of the political debate in the U.S.,⁷ and has been able to shove true conservatives down some sort of socialist memory hole. But even the "old right,"⁸ while much more libertarian

⁴ Hoppe goes so far as to assert that "Conservative refers to someone who believes in the existence of a natural order"; Hans-Hermann Hoppe, *Democracy: The God that Failed* (Rutgers, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2001), p. 187. The difficulty is that "natural order" is this author's synonym for anarcho-capitalism. This assertion implies, then, that conservatives are not limited-government libertarians, or "minarchists." Instead, they are, far more radically, free-market anarchists. This is so far from being correct that one can be excused for wondering whether it is a typographical error.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 189.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Paul Gottfried, "McCarthy Was Right," available online at: <http://www.lewrockwell.com/gottfried/gottfried21.html>.

⁸ Justin Raimondo, *Reclaiming the American Right* (Burlingame, CA: Center for Libertarian Studies, 1993).

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than their “conservative” successors (such as Goldwater who passed for conservative before the neo-cons came on the scene) were not pure libertarian.

Hoppe cites Robert Nisbet as an exemplar, presumably, of the proper kind of conservatism. But Nisbet himself was far from being an advocate of laissez-faire capitalism.⁹

To summarize this section, let me note that Hoppe states: “... [C]onservatives today must be antistatist libertarians.” My reply is that if conservatives *were* antistatist libertarians,¹⁰ then they would not be conservatives in the first place, but rather libertarians. Definitional legerdemain¹¹ will not help achieve this very worthwhile goal.¹²

b. “... Libertarians must be conservatives”

Now, let us address the second of Hoppe’s claims, which is more important, since it is not merely definitional but rather substantive, and reaches to the core of the libertarian philosophy. Consider in this regard his assertion that with regard to “the decay of families, divorce, illegitimacy, loss of authority, multiculturalism, alternative lifestyles, social disintegration, sex and crime, all of these phenomena represent ... scandalous deviations from the natural order.”¹³ Remember, “natural order” is Hoppe’s synonym for

⁹ Hoppe, *Democracy: The God that Failed*, p. 191, n. 3, citing Robert Nisbet, “Conservatism,” in *A History of Sociological Analysis*, ed. Tom Bottomore and Robert Nisbet (New York: Basic Books, 1978) and Robert Nisbet, *Conservatism: Dream and Reality* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1986).

¹⁰ This would be an altogether very good thing.

¹¹ As evidence of this contention consider Hoppe’s citation of Rothbard as, of all things, an “old conservative”; see Hoppe, *Democracy: The God that Failed*, p. 198, n. 14.

¹² States Hoppe: “Genuine conservatives must be opposed to both [war-mongering neo-conservatism and the Buchananite version of economic nationalism and welfare statism]. In order to restore social and cultural normalcy, true conservatives can only be radical libertarians, and they must demand the demolition—as a moral and economic perversion—of the entire structure of social security”; see Hoppe, *Democracy: The God that Failed*, p. 199 (material in brackets paraphrased). Hoppe is undoubtedly correct that *if* the goal is to promote families, individual initiative, reliance, etc., something that at least some people who can correctly be identified as “conservatives” once favored, then only the libertarian program of laissez-faire capitalism can serve as a means toward this end. The problem, here, is that no self-styled “conservative” ever went quite so far in this direction. But when he talks of “true conservatives” favoring a total eradication of government social security programs, he is taking definitional liberties. He is inventing them out of whole cloth.

¹³ Hoppe, *Democracy: The God that Failed*, p. 190.

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anarcho-capitalism or pure libertarianism.¹⁴ Thus, he is maintaining, if I understand him correctly, that the decay of families, etc., is *per se* contrary to this philosophy.

This, I contend, is a misunderstanding of libertarianism. With the exception of crime, which is necessarily a violation of person and property rights, and, possibly, “multiculturalism” (if this is understood in terms of coercive force), there is not a single entry on this list that is necessarily incompatible with libertarianism. Take illegitimacy, for example.¹⁵ It cannot be denied that this is often, nay, virtually always, a tragedy, both for the individuals involved and for society as a whole. We know that illegitimacy plays a causal role, for example, in increased crime, suicide, juvenile delinquency, alcoholism rates, and with other indices of social and economic disarray. But for all that, we must hark back to basic libertarian principles to assess the assertion that illegitimacy *must* be incompatible with the tenets of this philosophy. Clearly, it is not. Fornication, for example, sexual intercourse outside of marriage, is very far indeed from a *per se* violation of rights; it is not at all an instance of the initiation of violence against a non-aggressor, an unwarranted border crossing of person or property. Rather, it is a *victimless crime*. As long as the conception of a baby is voluntary,¹⁶ such resulting illegitimacy is fully compatible with libertarianism. But I go further. Sexual congress which leads to the birth of an illegitimate baby is *every bit* as compatible with the libertarian non-aggression axiom as is *any other* voluntary act, such as playing checkers.

This does not mean, of course, that everyone is duty-bound to support illegitimacy. It is perfectly compatible with the doctrine of libertarianism to oppose, even bitterly so, all such activity. One would be entirely justified, for example, in boycotting the parents of all illegitimate children: neither selling to them nor buying from them nor hiring them nor working as their employees. Nonetheless, it cannot be maintained that illegitimacy is incompatible with libertarianism, as it is truly the case with conservatism. This is because libertarianism is *solely* a political philosophy. It asks one and only one question: Under what conditions is the use of violence justified? And it gives one and only one answer: Violence can be used only in response, or reaction to, a prior violation of private property rights. Conservatism, in very sharp contrast, is only partially a political

¹⁴ Ibid., pp. 74-75.

¹⁵ The same analysis applies to all others on Hoppe’s list.

¹⁶ Were it not, it would be rape, something totally outside of the realm of legitimate acts in a libertarian society.

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philosophy.¹⁷ It includes, too, a vision of the good life which is totally lacking in libertarianism.

Hoppe makes much of the fact that libertarianism and cultural conservatism are fully compatible.¹⁸ And, indeed, he is entirely correct in this matter. However, libertarianism is compatible with *any* cultural behavior, provided only that the culture is not incompatible with the libertarian axiom on non-aggression. For example, libertarianism is *also* compatible with hippie leftism; indeed, the freedom philosophy is *every* bit as compatible with the counter-culture lifestyle as it is with conservatism. For example, there is nothing in libertarian law which forbids promiscuity, or drug taking, rock music, raves, nudism, macrobiotic diets, Ben and Jerry ice cream, the wearing of earth shoes, beads, etc. And that is all that is required for “compatibility.”

Hoppe goes further in behalf of his favorite side of the aisle: “The relationship between libertarianism and conservatism is one of praxeological compatibility, sociological complementarity and reciprocal reinforcement.”¹⁹ This may well all be true, but it is unnecessary overkill. *All* that is needed for compatibility with libertarianism and *any* other doctrine is respect for the non-aggression axiom of the former. Many, many things exhibit this characteristic, for example, chess, checkers, tennis, bowling, swimming, etc.

Hoppe also points to the fact that many of the leading libertarians, such as Murray Rothbard and Ludwig von Mises, were culturally conservative as evidence of a sort for the compatibility of libertarianism and conservatism.²⁰ One might as well say that since “conservative” is spelled with twelve letters, “libertarian” with eleven, and “liberal” with only seven, that libertarian and conservative are closer to each other than is libertarian and liberal. The personal tastes, practices, and actions of Rothbard and Mises, and myself and Hoppe for that matter, might all be “culturally conservative.” However, this does not privilege conservatism, vis-à-vis hippie counter-culture perversions by one whit as more deserving of the honorific

¹⁷ And in this role it gives very far from the libertarian answer to this question. Indeed, for conservatives, initiatory force is justified in a whole host of cases: when undertaken by the state, when in opposition to sins such as fornication, prostitution, drug use, pornography, etc.

¹⁸ Hoppe, *Democracy: The God that Failed*, p. 203.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 202.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

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“libertarian.” Both are *equally* libertarian, provided only that they accord with its *one* axiom of private property rights based on homesteading.²¹

c. The so-called “modal” libertarian

Hoppe cites Rothbard to dramatic effect, castigating the modal, that is, leftist libertarian.²² No doubt there are such people as he describes, who are moochers, bums, attracted to “New Age hokum,” and engaging in “adolescent rebellion.” But there are problems here, for Hoppe’s thesis is that libertarians must give up these counter-cultural lifestyles, and no such conclusion follows from his premises.

First of all, while there can be no doubt that there are some people who call themselves libertarians and fit this particular bill, there are no hard facts offered as to how far this phenomenon has spread. Had I to hazard a guess, based upon years of informally interacting with members of the Libertarian Party, libertarian supper clubs, debating societies, etc., I would put it at no more than ten percent.²³ Second, and more important, it is important not to vouchsafe to all of those who give themselves this appellation with the honorific, “libertarian.” That is, not all of those who Hoppe and Rothbard dismiss as modal libertarians should be considered libertarians in the first place. Certainly, this applies to all of those who oppose not the initiation of aggression, but instead, or even in addition, hierarchy and natural authority. For example, those who oppose landlords, parents, employers, orchestra conductors, and leaders because they give orders to tenants, children, employees, musicians, and followers, are some variant of leftist, and are not libertarian at all. Those so-called libertarians, moreover, who elevate egalitarianism, of all things, to a high political principle, are to that extent

²¹ My claim is that Hoppe is conflating substantive libertarian issues with matters of taste. For example, Mozart and Bach are “right wing” while folk songs are “left wing.” This is an example of merely a difference in style, which should not be confused with substantive issues. It matters not one whit to one’s libertarian credentials what kind of music he likes. Even though there may be a strong empirical correlation between style and substance, it is still, strictly speaking, irrelevant.

²² Hoppe, *Democracy: The God that Failed*, pp. 206-8, n. 22.

²³ Note that Hoppe cites only two instances of this phenomenon: David Boaz and Clint Bolick; see *ibid.*, p. 209, n. 23. With regard to the critics of modals cited by Hoppe, e.g., Rothbard and Tucker, between them they offer very few specific examples; see Murray Rothbard, “Big-Government Libertarians,” *Rothbard-Rockwell Report* 5, no. 11 (November 1994), pp. 1-15, and Jeffrey Tucker, “Book Reviews,” *The Journal of Libertarian Studies* 13, no. 1 (Fall 1997), pp. 109-20. The former goes out of his way not to mention any names whatsoever (although, reading between the lines, one can discern, preeminently, the Libertarian Party, *Reason* and *Liberty* magazines, and the Cato Institute). The latter mentions only Charles Murray in addition to David Boaz.

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certainly not libertarians. And the same thing applies to self-styled “libertarians” who reject the libertarian notion of freedom of association in favor of non-“discrimination.”²⁴ We must not accept without demur all political labels given by people to themselves. Hoppe properly excoriates several “left libertarians,” such as Clint Bolick and David Boaz, for jettisoning the libertarian notion of free association in favor of several variants of coercive affirmative action.²⁵ But why call them “libertarians” on this issue? That only confuses matters. True, both have taken many other libertarian positions, so it is tempting to characterize them as “left libertarians” for this particular transgression. But it would be far more accurate to consider them as libertarians, period, on those issues where their positions are congruent with this philosophy, and as *leftists* in this particular case.²⁶

Similarly with the right. Rothbard (1994, p. 9) states:

[O]ne of the most disgraceful performances of virtually all free market think tanks, and of all Official Libertarian journals and institutions, was their falling into line like so many sheep to agitate on behalf of NAFTA, and now for the proposed World Trade Organization. A Canadian institute managed with no resistance to herd almost every free market think tank in this country into what they called the ‘Nafta Network,’ which devoted an unprecedented amount of resources to almost continual agitation, propaganda and so-called ‘research,’ in behalf of the passage of Nafta. And not only the think tanks: they were also joined by the considerable number of libertarians and libertarian sympathizers among syndicated columnists, writers and assorted pundits.²⁷

There can be no doubt that Rothbard is correct in his assessment of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). To mention this in the same sentence as “libertarianism” is to besmirch the latter. But why characterize advocates of NAFTA as, of all things, “libertarian”? It is no less than a promiscuous misuse of language to do so. True, in some of these cases, these think tanks have taken *other* positions that can indeed be characterized as “libertarian.” But surely, accuracy in language requires that these groups not

²⁴ Hoppe, *Democracy: The God that Failed*, p. 208.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 208-10.

²⁶ For a reply to Hoppe’s assertion that free immigration requires a violation of freedom of association (*ibid.*, p. 209, n. 23), see my “National Defense and the Theory of Externalities, Public Goods, and Clubs” (unpublished).

²⁷ Rothbard, “Big-Government Libertarians,” p. 9.

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be characterized, holus-bolus, as “libertarian.” Rather, precision mandates that they be called something of the order of “supposed libertarians,” or “semi-libertarians,” or “would-be libertarians,” or “self-styled libertarians,” or some such term.²⁸

The “Canadian institute” referred to by Rothbard is obviously the Fraser Institute. But to label the Fraser Institute as a “libertarian” organization is particularly egregious.²⁹ They billed themselves not as libertarian but as conservative. The leadership was and is singularly hostile to libertarianism. They were “libertarian” only on issues that flowed from the most elementary principles of economics: minimum wage, rent control, etc. And even in such cases they did not typically advocate immediate and total repeal, but rather a more moderate or measured course of action. To call them “libertarian,” and then to castigate libertarians on the ground that the Fraser Institute did not favor radical libertarian public policy is highly problematic.³⁰

Hoppe is completely on point with regard to his analysis of the importance of the right to discriminate. Without it, one of the prime functions of private property rights is abrogated.³¹ However, his complaint that “everyone is on a first name basis with everyone else” and that this is “uncivilized”³² seems more a matter of taste than of political philosophy. According to some conventions, only “equals” or family members are entitled to address one another by their given names, and equality is defined very narrowly. According to others, apart from children talking to adults who are

²⁸ Can I be accused of circularity of argument? There is a superficial case in favor of such as assessment. Every time Hoppe, Rothbard, or Tucker castigates a “libertarian” for non-libertarian stances, I maintain that this is not a case of left-wing (or right-wing—see below) libertarian deviationism. Rather, the people and groups properly excoriated by Hoppe, Rothbard, and Tucker are not libertarians at all, at least with regard to the points in question. My argument in response to this charge is that it is I, not they, who is using language correctly. My assertions thus amount to praxeological claims. After all, we all four agree as to what libertarianism is, at least as it concerns these left-wing “deviations.” When it is patently clear that they are *not* libertarians on a particular issue, where is the virtue in claiming that they are?

²⁹ Full disclosure: I was employed by the Fraser Institute from 1979 to 1991.

³⁰ Just so that there will be no misunderstanding, I am in total and full agreement with Rothbard’s analysis of the issues he discusses in Rothbard, “Big-Government Libertarians.” My only objection is to his labeling of such groups as Reason, Liberty, Cato, Fraser, etc., as libertarian.

³¹ Hoppe, *Democracy: The God that Failed*, pp. 208-13.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 211.

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strangers, use of first names indicates familiarity and/or friendship, and this can occur between people of widely differing accomplishments and status. Rothbard, for example, habitually encouraged libertarians who had contributed far less to this discipline than he (and this includes pretty much every person on the planet) to address him by first name. As Hoppe instances Rothbard as a symbol of cultural conservatism, this might be expected to carry some weight.

More problematic is Hoppe's statement that

a society in which the right to exclusion is fully restored to owners of private property would be profoundly unequalitarian, intolerant and discriminatory. There would be little or no 'tolerance' and 'open-mindedness' so dear to left-libertarians. Instead, one would be on the right path toward restoring the freedom of association and exclusion implied in the institution of private property, if only towns and villages could and would do what they did as a matter of course until well into the nineteenth century in Europe and the United States. There would be signs regarding entrance requirements to the town ... (for example, no beggars, bums, or homeless, but also no homosexuals,³³ drug users, Jews, Moslems, Germans or Zulus).³⁴

No one is less receptive than me to "tolerance" when it is used to violate private rights and the law of free association.³⁵ Nor is there anything even the

³³ There are those who characterize themselves as "conservatives" or "libertarian conservatives" who would impose no less than the death penalty for consensual adult homosexuality in private (usually, but not always, on biblical grounds). Surely, Hoppe's enthusiasm for the former philosophical perspective would not extend to the latter implication. Given this, here is at least one issue upon which Hoppe himself could be considered a modal or left libertarian, or, better yet, a plumb-line advocate of this viewpoint.

³⁴ Hoppe, *Democracy: The God that Failed*, p. 211.

³⁵ Walter Block, "Discrimination: An Interdisciplinary Analysis," *Journal of Business Ethics* 11 (1992), pp. 241-54; Walter Block, "Compromising the Uncompromisable: Discrimination," *American Journal of Economics and Sociology* 57, no. 2 (April 1998), pp. 223-37; Walter Block, Roy Whitehead, and Lu Hardin, "Gender Equity in Athletics: Should We Adopt a Non-Discriminatory Model?" *University of Toledo Law Review* 30, no. 2 (Winter 1999), pp. 223-49; Walter Block and Roy Whitehead, "The Boy Scouts, Freedom of Association, and the Right to Discriminate: A Legal, Philosophical, and Economic Analysis," *Whittier Law Review* (forthcoming); Walter Block and Edward Stringham, "Are Banks and Insurance Companies Guilty of Racial Discrimination?" *Commentaries on Law and Public Policy* (forthcoming); Walter Block and Roy Whitehead, "Should the Government Be Allowed to Engage in Racial, Sexual, or Other Discrimination?" *Northern Illinois Law Review* (forthcoming).

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slightest untoward about forbidding Hoppe's list from private property. Of course, this would go as well for icons beloved of conservatives: men wearing suits and ties, women in burkas, businessmen, profiteers, sweatshop owners, conservatives, Christians, etc. They, too, could be forbidden access to private property by their owners. But there is the rub: Only owners of *private property* are justified, in the libertarian legal code, of excluding from entry. It would not at all be legitimate for Hoppe's "towns and villages," in contrast, to engage in any such activity. For these are public entities, and hence *per se* illicit.³⁶ The point is, suppose that the town or village passed a law prohibiting the entry of a bum, or a Jew, or a Christian, but that one of the local property owners wanted to invite such a person into his home or store.³⁷ Then, for the town council to forbid this access would be a violation of private property rights, the very bedrock of libertarianism.³⁸

Then there is the issue of "society." Hoppe speaks of the "physical removal from society" of all those who advocate "alternative non-family and kin-centered lifestyles such as, for instance, individual hedonism, parasitism, nature-environment worship, homosexuality or communism."³⁹ But as he also champions Rothbard's support for a "gorgeous mosaic," including "rowdy Greenwich Village-type contractual neighborhoods,"⁴⁰ the two are difficult to reconcile. Perhaps by "society" Hoppe really means, in effect, something along the lines of "polite society." But if so, the issue of "physical removal" would surely not arise. Society matrons and their ilk would not invite such denizens to their soirees in the first place.

Hoppe states: "[N]o one is permitted to advocate ideas contrary to the very purpose of the covenant of preserving and protecting private

³⁶ A similar confusion between the public and the private spheres is made by Randall Holcombe, *The Economic Foundations of Government* (London: Macmillan Press Ltd., 1994). For a rejoinder to this view, see Block, "National Defense and the Theory of Externalities, Public Goods, and Clubs."

³⁷ Assume for simplicity that this individual's property lie on the perimeter of the town, so as to abstract from any complexities of using village roads.

³⁸ Nothing said here should be interpreted to disparage Hoppe's discussion of shopping malls, gated communities, proprietary communities, or restrictive covenants; see Hoppe, *Democracy: The God that Failed*, pp. 214-18. These entities most certainly do have the right to exclude individuals on any basis of their choosing.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 218.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 212, n. 25.

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property, such as democracy....”⁴¹ If this is to be limited to members of the restrictive covenant or gated community, all of whom have agreed in advance to be bound by such strictures, well and good. Contracts, provided they are compatible with underlying property rights realities, are a legitimate aspect of the free society.⁴² But it is by no means clear that Hoppe would limit proscriptions of this sort to such signatories. Disquieting.

On the basis of these considerations Hoppe maintains that “libertarians must be radical and uncompromising conservatives.”⁴³ But if the left-oriented libertarians amongst us are flawed, no less is true of so-called conservative libertarians. Hoppe penned his missive, presumably, before the tragic events of 9/11. Since that time the “schmodal libertarian,”⁴⁴ if I can coin a phrase to describe not libertarians who veer too far to the left but rather those who are in danger of getting into bed with the right, have *also* espoused views that the plumb-line libertarian must consider highly problematic. The conservative libertarians, or schmodals, have been in effect calling for the U.S. government to nuke back into the stone-age myriads of innocent civilians living in such places as Afghanistan, Iraq, Somalia, etc. They go so far as to espouse the use of nuclear weapons, which are *per se* violative of rights, insofar as their effects cannot even in principle be confined to the guilty. They have been maintaining that the dastardly and immoral attack on the World Trade Center was due not to prior U.S. intervention in every corner of the globe known to man, and some not known, but rather to *too little* foreign aggression of this sort.

In contrast, the plumb-line position of libertarianism, I take it, is, roughly, to emulate the non-interventionistic foreign policy laid down by George Washington in his “Farewell Address.” Surely, the modal libertarians, whatever their flaws (and these are many and serious), are in a vastly *better* position vis-à-vis plumb-line libertarianism than are these conservatives who

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 218.

⁴² See Hans-Hermann Hoppe, Guido Hulsmann, and Walter Block, “Against Fiduciary Media,” *Quarterly Journal of Austrian Economics* 1, no. 1 (1998), pp. 19-50.

⁴³ Hoppe, *Democracy: The God that Failed*, p. 208.

⁴⁴ Echoing Rothbard’s entirely justified and properly savage evisceration of the modals, we can say the following of the “schmodals”: they are war-mongering Neanderthals who have a strange myopia about the loss of innocent life abroad. They think that the American government has some sort of God-given right to rule the world. They regard anything contrary to what they take as U.S. interests as sufficient justification for foreign interventionism—anywhere on the globe. So who is worse, who veers further from plumb-line libertarianism: left-wing modal libertarians, or right-wing schmodal libertarians? All that can be said is that each one is worse than the other.

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have somehow infiltrated our ranks—at least on foreign policy. If there is any house cleaning to be done, it is not limited to one side of the aisle, as Hoppe would have it; *both sides* fully deserve the attention of the plumb-liner. And, if we had to choose one side or the other (which we do not), there is actually a case to be made for greater negative attention to be focused on Hoppe’s much beloved conservative schmodals, rather than the liberal or pinko modals, insofar as foreign policy tends more often to lead to domestic loss of liberty, and not the other way around. Hoppe mentions among others the Cato Institute as a hot bed of left-libertarianism.⁴⁵ Yes, this is understandable when it comes to the rights of free association and discrimination. But as far as foreign policy is concerned, this very self-same institution is one of the most notorious violators of plumb-line libertarianism from the *conservative* side. Cato may violate libertarian strictures as a leftist on domestic issues, but the case against them is at least as strong, if not stronger, for taking positions incompatible with pure libertarianism in the foreign realm, this time as a *rightist*.

4. Conclusion

Libertarianism can be a pretty lonely business. I have been at it for many decades now, and I fully empathize with this sentiment. The temptation, therefore, to reach out to others for intellectual sustenance and moral support is a strong one. Yet, I am convinced, it must be resisted at all costs and strenuously. For, ultimately, we libertarians really *are* all alone out there—and for good reason. We have a truly *unique* political philosophy. It is so different from all of the others that we are still, even at the turn of the twenty-first century, wildly misunderstood. We are confused with libertines, and even, according to some (perhaps apocryphal) stories, with *librarians*.

If we do *not* resist this temptation, we risk the loss of the libertarian vision itself. The fate of civilization rests on our resisting the notion that we are part of some larger political movement, that others, for example, conservatives, have important lessons to teach us.

⁴⁵ Hoppe, *Democracy: The God that Failed*, p. 208.