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Social Security, George W. Bush--And the "L" Word (No, Not Liberalism)

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Millions of Americans who view Social Security as one of the most successful programs ever created by the U.S. government find current talk about its supposed failures puzzling. They recognize that the system is generally healthy today, and they understand that some minor adjustments in future years can sustain it long past the middle of the twenty-first century, the time when shortfalls will likely develop because of an aging population. Yet President Bush continues to make frightening predictions about the system's coming "bankruptcy" and "collapse." Furthermore, his proposal to shift funds to private accounts will add about \$2.5 trillion to the already huge national debt, since cash would have to come from somewhere to pay current benefits after the change.

Why would the president put the nation's finances and the wellbeing of future retirees at great risk, many ask? Is there more to his opposition to Social Security than meets the eye?

There is. A key to the Bush Administration's hostility to Social Security can be found in ideology. The president and many of his top advisers view the issue in the manner of libertarians. They prefer not to mention the L-word in public, though, because they do not want to frighten the American people.

George W. Bush did not suddenly discover a need to change the Social Security program radically because of the appearance of disturbing new statistical evidence about the system's future difficulties. He expressed libertarian-style contempt for the system decades ago when he first ran for public office in Texas. He views economic issues in the manner of a libertarian and takes advice on economic policy from many of them, but he is careful not to identify himself openly with their ideology.

Bush and other libertarian-style thinkers that have gained prominence in Washington, D.C. in recent decades champion markets in the extreme. They are enthusiasts of *laissez faire* who oppose strong governmental intervention in the affairs of individuals and businesses. Libertarians prefer to reduce government's activities to a few essential services such as defending the public from foreign threats and protecting citizens from criminals. They seek the privatization of state-run programs (such as Social Security) and massive tax cuts. Often they advance their goal of limited government by squeezing the budgets of social programs.

Libertarians sometimes succeed in winning public support for such budget reductions by fostering situations that make severe declines in domestic spending appear necessary. They tend to be less troubled by today's gargantuan deficits than moderate conservatives and liberals, because those imbalances can force changes that they promote. Libertarians love the tax cuts that contributed to deficits, and they know that the public's fears about a growing budget crisis will justify finance-chopping actions against popular entitlement programs such Medicaid, the health system for the poor.

Frequently, libertarians attempt to soften public enthusiasm for the government's social outlays by claiming that federal programs are in a state of crisis. President Bush and his supporters have exemplified this practice recently by likening Social Security to the *Titanic* approaching the icebergs.

Libertarian-minded Americans, including the president, tend to avoid any public association of their proposals with libertarianism, because they do not want to be identified with a controversial philosophy. They seldom mention the L-word, because libertarianism has a reputation for radicalism. One of the leading gurus of libertarian thought in the United States, Nobel Prize-winning economist Milton Friedman, avoids the term as much as the president. Friedman likes to call himself a classic liberal of the nineteenth-century tradition.

Committed libertarians tend to be sticklers for consistency. If government is the problem and not the solution, they reason, then its role in modern American life should be reduced considerably. Many libertarians resist forms of state intervention in the public interest such as pollution controls, government-initiated college loan programs, unemployment compensation, regulation of pharmaceutical products, monitoring of toys for child safety, and provision of housing and food stamps for the poor.

Furthermore, libertarians often celebrate the "moral autonomy of the individual," which means, essentially, that most activities involving adults are O.K. as long as they do not harm others. Many (but not all libertarians) believe mature Americans should enjoy an unfettered right to indulge in drugs, consume alcohol, obtain pornography, or participate in gay

relationships. Additionally, many oppose wars generally, because war usually leads to higher taxes and larger government. Specific aspects of this broad agenda appeal to many people. Few Americans, however, are willing to accept the entire package, much of which was outlined years ago by a pioneer of the movement, Murray Rothbard.

Quite a few libertarian-minded Americans like to cherry-pick favorite themes and turn away from others. George W. Bush is a notable example. He gives particular attention to the libertarians' ideas about the economy. Bush often expresses enthusiasm for free markets and small government. On the other hand, President Bush does not publicly promote the libertarians' social themes, which maintain that citizens have the right to live in any way they choose as long as they respect the rights of others. And, of course, the president has shown little public interest in the traditional libertarian advocacy of peace over war.

When President Bush and other hard-line, market-oriented conservatives present their case for limited government, they usually call for specific measures to deal with specific problems, concealing their larger ideological interests. They offer proposals in ways that make the recommended changes seem like needed solutions to save the nation from a crisis rather than a philosophical cause designed to move the libertarian ideal closer to reality.

Washington-based libertarians (such as those associated with the Cato Institute) frequently provide the news media with data suggesting that government programs are failing. Then they suggest radical measures to remedy the problem. Libertarians talk about failing "government" schools and then propose vouchers to support private school education. They describe Medicare programs as unsustainable, then recommend private insurance programs to replace them. And, of course, they talk about a Social Security crisis and point to privatization as a remedy (although they chose other terms to describe their program for Social Security after polls showed that many Americans reacted negatively to the word "privatization").

When discussing the debates over Social Security, it would be useful for the news media and the public to look beyond familiar disagreements over interpreting demographic data and comparing the merits of long-term investment in stocks and treasury bonds. The clash over Social Security involves more than disputes about crunching numbers. It is also about ideology. The libertarian-inspired assault on Social Security represents one battle in a full-scale war that aims to defeat many of the principal government-oriented reforms of the twentieth century.

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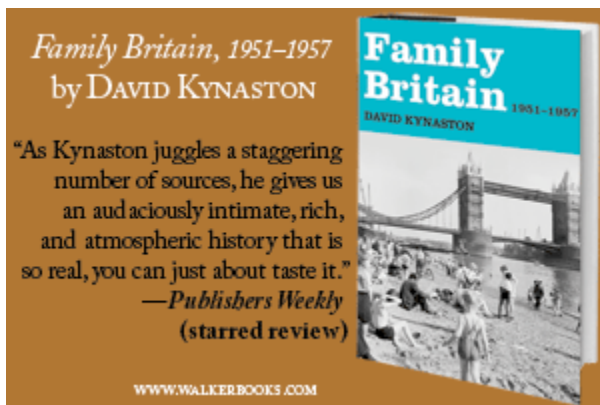
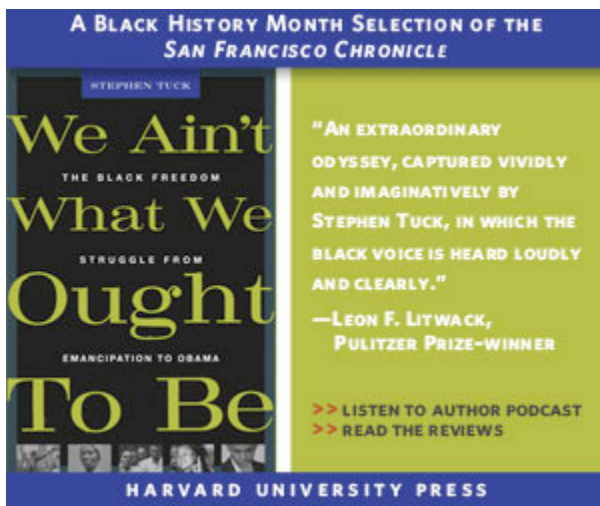
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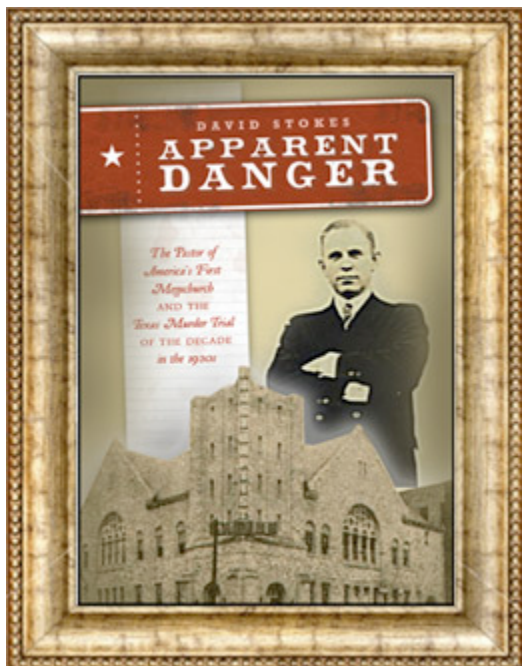


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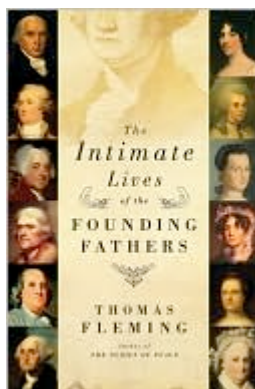


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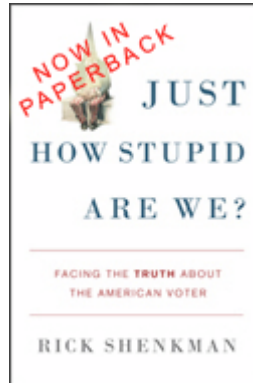
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