



Liberty From an Intergalactic Perspective

Some readers of this column may very well remember the late '70s-early '80s sitcom, *Mork and Mindy*. Mork, played by Robin Williams, was an alien from the planet "Ork" who had been deployed to Earth in order to discover more about the ways of its inhabitants. At the end of each week's episode, audiences would watch as Mork relayed his findings to "Orson," his superior. Now, imagine if a Mork-like being were to visit our planet for the sake of acquiring knowledge regarding America's politics. What would he discover?



Well, within minutes of his spacecraft landing he would determine that those beings who call themselves "Americans" have something bordering on an obsession with what they call "liberty." At virtually every turn, it is impossible to go for long without hearing the language of "liberty" and "freedom" spring from their lips.

Being the inquisitive sort that he is, it is only natural that this alien should want to probe more deeply into the character of this "liberty." So he does. Our sociologist from another planet, so as to keep himself from becoming conspicuous, would first try to discern its meaning by listening carefully to the inflection and intonations of the voices of those speaking of liberty. In doing so, he would become hopeful that he would before long get to the bottom of it all, for what he would detect is that talk of liberty is almost invariably accompanied by excitement and enthusiasm — as sure a sign as any that this "liberty" is something to which these Americans attach no small measure of importance. Liberty, that is, isn't just *a* good, as far as the Americans are concerned; it is quite possibly *the greatest of all goods*.

Our alien would now *really* be curious to find out more about liberty. And though he would hate to admit it to himself, he would find the impulse to jettison his disinterestedness by interjecting himself into his study increasingly difficult to resist. But no, his self-discipline would prevail and he would continue with his inquiry.

In his quest to find out what it is that makes liberty the greatest of all goods, our alien investigator might resolve to interrogate its apparent devotees. "What exactly *is* liberty?" he would ask them. And why wouldn't he? This is such a straightforward question. Surely, he would assume, it invites a comparably straightforward answer.

Within no time, though, to his chagrin, he would discover that for all of the assuredness with which these Americans proclaim the blessings of their liberty, they couldn't come remotely close to achieving a consensus as to what liberty is. While any given person would waste no time in articulating *his* definition of liberty, in vain would our alien search for an account of liberty that was to *everyone's* satisfaction. In fact, among a relatively small group of randomly selected Americans, distinct and even conflicting statements of liberty would emerge.

Lesser spirits would have been tempted at this juncture to throw in the towel. A less facile inquirer would have seized upon this seemingly bizarre phenomenon as compelling evidence for the futility of



Written by [Jack Kerwick, Ph.D.](#) on October 28, 2011

the search for the meaning of liberty. But our alien, being made of steelier stuff than this, would resolve to change tactics. Rather than approach Americans at random, he would instead devote his attention to only those Americans who sounded most enamored with liberty.

In his studies, our alien would realize that American politics is, for the most part, a perpetual power contest between two major organizations or “parties,” as Americans call them. Though the members of both parties tirelessly declare their love for liberty, the members of what is referred to as “the *Democratic Party*” have a predilection to supplement their invocations of liberty with similarly impassioned allusions to something they’ve labeled “equality.” In contrast, those who belong to what is called “the *Republican Party*” speak almost exclusively of liberty. Thus, our alien would reason, those who speak most confidently and consistently of liberty are those who are likely to know best as to what it entails. So, it is to these creatures called “Republicans” that he would gravitate.

Initially, this observer of American politics couldn’t help but to feel encouraged by his decision to narrow his focus. Finally, it would appear, he is getting somewhere as to determining the nature of this ever elusive thing called “liberty.” Republicans, though far from being able to supply him with the degree of precision for which he longed, would nevertheless be able to provide him with *some* idea as to which direction he should turn in furthering his analysis of liberty.

Liberty, he would find out, requires what is called “limited government.” What this implies is that neither the authority to rule nor the power by which authority rules can be concentrated in few hands. Liberty, then, is inseparable — indeed, indistinguishable — from an affirmation of “*individuality*.” It is individual beings, “citizens,” who should be, well, at *liberty* to pursue their *own* purposes; liberty, that is, forbids that individuals should be *compelled* or *coerced* to pursue the purposes of others. This is what our alien would discover as the concept of liberty, through slow and gradual steps, began to emerge from the darkness of ambiguity to assume some measure of distinctness.

But no sooner than his hopes would begin to rise than they would be dashed. Once he achieved familiarity with the concept of “government,” on the one hand, and that of “the individual” or “the citizen,” on the other, it would take our alien no time to recognize why *the liberty* of the individual presupposes or entails a diminution in the size and scope of his government.

Or so our alien would think.

Upon observing the conduct of those called “Republicans,” including and especially their conduct throughout what they refer to as their “presidential primary race,” he would observe a glaring inconsistency between what he had heard them say at some times and places and their utterances at other times and places.

Just when he would think that he had taken hold of the crux of liberty, he would become convinced that it had once again eluded his grasp. After all, the very same people upon whom our alien researcher had chosen to set his sights, those Republicans who indefatigably sang hosannas to “liberty,” “limited government,” and “individualism,” he would witness falling all over themselves giving praise to “leaders” and prospective party “leaders” who were busy trying to outdo one another via their *promises* to actually *expand* government. Of course, he wouldn’t hear anyone ever *explicitly* make any such promises; but by now, our alien would know his subject well enough to know that the positions of the Republican presidential candidates on the issues beckoned for a *consolidation* of authority and power — *not* its dispersal.

Those individuals who aspired to become the titular head of the party of “liberty” were almost



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unanimous in their support of their nation's central bank, what the Americans referred to as "the Federal Reserve." Insofar as the Federal Reserve places a virtually unlimited amount of power to manipulate the nation's currency in just a few hands, our alien would have to judge it to be positively inimical to liberty — if, that is, liberty is what he initially suspected it to be.

The Republican presidential contenders were almost unanimous as well in their support of waging an intrinsically interminable war — what they characterized as "the War on Terror." Alternatively, they spoke of this enterprise in more euphemistic terms, as a "Freedom Agenda." Either way, our alien would discern the apparent contradiction in simultaneously affirming "limited government" *and* endless war, for the latter requires the *expansion* and *strengthening* of government and — again, assuming that his first glimpse of "liberty" was accurate — a corresponding diminution of liberty.

Domestically, the Republican presidential candidates argue for "privatizing" this or that program, presumably for the sake of maximizing liberty. Yet such "privatization" is still subject to government oversight, for one, and, secondly, it is a *supplement* to and not a *substitute* for the government programs that already exist and that will continue to be financed by taxpayers.

Granted, there was *one* self-identified Republican presidential contender who *always* spoke consistently with what our alien had expected to hear given his first impressions of liberty. This candidate passionately opposed growing the government for the sake of prosecuting wars with other lands. He called for an end to America's "Welfare State" and its central bank. But since this Republican was ignored, ridiculed, mocked, and even demonized by his fellow partisans — just those Americans who he supposed knew best about liberty — the alien would have to judge, even if only provisionally, that they were on to something. Still, he was at a complete loss to determine what that was. So, by this juncture, he would have concluded that this "liberty" thing promised to forever escape his understanding.

As this exhausted explorer from another world sailed out of our orbit, never to look to Earth again, he would be consumed with both disappointment and pity. He would be disappointed not just by the fact that he had to abort his mission before he could determine the nature of liberty, but by the fact that this phenomenon was *more* of a mystery to him *now* than before he launched his operation. He would as well be filled with pity for Americans, particularly Republicans, for while humility would caution him against equating *his* ignorance of liberty with *their* alleged ignorance of the same, it would be hard for him not think that these poor people knew not of what they spoke. And as long as this suspicion gnawed at him, he couldn't help to think that the hour was rapidly approaching when these folks would find themselves in far more dire straights than those in which they currently dwelled. After all, the one person who sounded the most sensible they derided as a "nut."



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