

If Conservatism Is The Ideology of Freedom, I'm The Queen of England

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I wish I had a nickel for every time a conservative told a lie in order to sell an ideology that would otherwise be hopelessly unappealing. But, then, what the hell would I do with ten kazillion, trillion, dollars? I wouldn't know how to spend that much loot.

These lies are legend, and they're endlessly retold. Everything from the one about the liberal bias in the media, or the one about Ronald Reagan ending the Cold War, to the one about how the private sector is so much more efficient than the government. And how about Saddam's arsenal of WMD, eh? Or the tax cuts that weren't going to drive the federal government into deficit? Or remember when George Bush told us that the war in Iraq was over, before it had even really started? Or the bit about how global warming is just a great big conspiracy among those noted well-known cabalists, er ... climatology scientists?

I'm only just getting started here, but you get the point. If you're a conservative you basically have two choices - lie or lose. 'Cause if you tell the truth, no one in his or her right mind would buy the garbage you're peddling.

The list of lies is endless, but my personal favorite is the one about how conservatism is the ideology of freedom, and specifically freedom from an overweening, intrusive, liberty-stealing, nanny-state government.

Sometimes when I hear that howler, I have to pinch myself to make sure I'm not off in some virtual reality world (like 'Liberty' University, or the Republican national convention) somewhere. Because, clearly, between me and the well-programmed fool mouthing these hopeless inanities, one of us is, that's for sure.

But I'll tell you what, if conservatism is the ideology of freedom - then I'm the Queen of England. And, one thing you can be sure of is that I'm not the Queen of England. I don't even have the right parts and pieces, and the only crown I've ever worn was given to me forty years ago by some pimply-faced teenager working the cash register at Burger King. Somehow, I don't think that counts.

Meanwhile, here's what I'd like to know:

If conservatism is the ideology of freedom, how come they're the ones who fought against the American Revolution?

If conservatism is the ideology of freedom, how come they're the ones who are always trying to take that freedom away from us, especially women and minorities? Why did they fight against the effort to end slavery, or to give women and minorities the vote, or to protect them from discrimination? Why are they still supporting efforts to disenfranchise minorities?

If conservatism is the ideology of freedom, how come they're the ones who bitterly opposed the New Deal at a time when Americans were ravaged by the Great Depression and the only freedom they

were desperately seeking was from unemployment, starvation, humiliation and death? We should give thanks for their efforts ever since then, though, as they've been kind enough to keep trying to liberate seniors from the hell of receiving their Social Security benefits, bravely volunteering Wall Street to carry that burden instead.

If conservatism is the ideology of freedom, how come they're the ones who are always propping up foreign dictators, like Saddam, Musharraf, Mubarak, Marcos, Pinochet, the Shah, Batista, the House of Saud and apartheid South Africa? Why did they, in some of these cases, secretly topple democratically elected governments to install repressive regimes, which they then assisted in the torturing of their own citizens? Exactly which definition of 'freedom' does that fall under?

If conservatism is the ideology of freedom, how come they're the ones who are always trying to control other people's sexuality? Why are conservatives always telling us whom we can sleep with and what we can do in bed, even including whether we can use birth control?

If conservatism is the ideology of freedom, how come they're the ones who are always trying to make sure that the state takes control of women's bodies, denying them reproductive choice and freedom?

If conservatism is the ideology of freedom, how come they're the ones who are always trying to tell us who we can marry? How come they believe that the state - which they always seem to hate, except when it is at war - should be able to make that most personal decision for us?

If conservatism is the ideology of freedom, how come they're the ones who are always blocking the environmental regulations which are the only hope to keep our bodies free from carcinogens and other harmful effects?

If conservatism is the ideology of freedom, how come they're the ones who refuse to allow us to use medical marijuana when we are suffering the effects of chemotherapy, and even perhaps at risk of dying from the wasting it causes?

Indeed, if conservatism is the ideology of freedom, how come they're the ones who are limiting the freedom of individuals to use drugs of any sort? If people want to use these substances and can do so without harming others, why do conservatives insist on restricting that freedom?

If conservatism is the ideology of freedom, how come they're the ones who refuse to allow us to die with dignity when we have a terminal disease, instead thrusting the state into the most personal and private decision a human being can make?

If conservatism is the ideology of freedom, how come they're the ones who passed an act of Congress intervening in the personal family tragedy of Terri Schiavo, with the president of the United States - the same one who couldn't be bothered to come off vacation to deal with the 9/11 threat or the Katrina disaster - flying across the country to sign it?

If conservatism is the ideology of freedom, how come they're the ones who are denying many of us the freedom to live by forbidding the stem-cell research that would likely produce cures to all manner of diseases now killing of millions of us every year?

If conservatism is the ideology of freedom, how come they're the ones who are loading up our children with mountains of debt that the federal government has borrowed under the stewardship of such notorious liberals as Ronald Reagan (who quadrupled the national debt) and George W. Bush (who borrowed more money from foreign governments than all 42 of his predecessors, combined)?

Right now, every eighteen year-old just starting a payroll job owes \$60,000, and rising, plus interest, as their share of the nine trillion dollars conservatives have been especially instrumental in running up as national debt. What kind of freedom, exactly, does that represent? Assuming (quite 'conservatively') that that number rises to \$100,000 before it is paid off, and that our young friend earns ten bucks an hour, it is the freedom to work five solid years, bringing home zero dollars after taxes, to do nothing whatsoever but paying off his share of the conservative binge.

If conservatism is the ideology of freedom, how come they're the ones who have taken the very lives of four thousand of our soldiers for a war based completely on lies? This same war has left tens of thousands of Americans gravely wounded, likely more than a million Iraqi civilians dead, and well over four million more Iraqis as refugees from the violence. What kind of freedom is this? The freedom from having to be alive and well? The freedom to serve three and four rotations of extended tours in the hell of Iraq, keeping our military personnel safe from their nagging mothers-in-law at home?

If conservatism is the ideology of freedom, how come they're the ones who are so anxious to take away our civil liberties, the most important of American freedoms, as enshrined in one of the greatest statements of freedom ever, the Bill of Rights? What happened to habeas corpus - a freedom dating back almost a thousand years - or the right to an attorney, or to have a trial, or to be protected from search and seizure without a judicially-issued warrant based on probable cause, or protection from torture? What happened to all those freedoms? What happened is that conservatives came to town and erased them.

If conservatism is the ideology of freedom, how come they're the ones who are always trying to have the government jam their religion down our throats, in direct opposition to the intentions of the Founders? The United States Constitution makes precisely the same number of references to the Christian god as it does to the Jewish, Muslim, Hindu and Zoroastrian. That would be none. What kind of freedom is it for everyone's tax dollars to support one group's religion, or for our government to impose a single religion on all of us?

If conservatism is the ideology of freedom, how come they're the ones who are always telling me I should leave the country if I don't approve the latest war for lies they've cooked up? How exactly does 'shut-up or leave' qualify as freedom of speech?

If conservatism is the ideology of freedom, how come they're the ones who are constantly attempting to turn the executive branch of the federal government into a monarchy? By using signing statements, endless claims of executive privilege, lack of congressional oversight when they controlled Congress, thwarted oversight when they didn't, and unprecedented levels of secrecy, they have shredded the fundamental doctrine of separated powers checking and balancing against each other. Since those ideas - the most basic concept of the Constitution - are intended to keep us safe from governments that would steal our liberties, just how is it that conservatism is the ideology of freedom?

Any one of these inconvenient truths, let alone the sum of all of them, demonstrate the absurdity of this claim. Not only is it ridiculous to call a conservatism that at every turn seeks to limit you - in what you can say, what you can ingest, who you can sleep with, marry, and even when you can end your own life - the ideology of freedom, but the only real conclusion that one can honestly come to on the basis of this historical record is of course just the opposite: Conservatism is, and has almost always been, the ideology of oppression - the very opposite of freedom.

When Americans wanted liberty from the British crown, conservative Tories not only in Britain but

here as well fought to block that freedom. When 'radicals' sought to emancipate the slaves, conservatives fought to keep them in chains. When progressives later sought equality for women and blacks, it was conservatives who stood in the doorways blocking entrance. And, today, as we seek justice and fairness for all people regardless of their sexual orientation, it is - wait for it, now - the conservative movement which not only resists that effort at every turn, but in fact shamefully turns their homophobia into a tool used to win elections, just as they have been doing with racism for forty years now.

Indeed, you have to be more or less deaf, dumb and blind - or perhaps simply watching Fox every night for your 'news' (which produces the same result) - to buy into this rhetoric from the theater of the absurd. Let me reiterate: If you think these monsters who are depriving you of your liberties at every opportunity represent freedom, then you need to bow, scrape and walk backwards in my presence, as a sign of respect for the British crown. I'll take a bunch of your money, too. Palaces aren't cheap to maintain, buddy.

Yeah, sure, it's true that conservatives will be right there for you if you want the freedom to buy guns and ammo, including 'cop-killer' bullets, assault rifles (to nail those most obstinate of pheasants, of course), or a fifty caliber rifle capable of bringing down a jumbo jet, and advertised as such in its sales literature. Of course, along with the freedom to buy these weapons (and how come, if the Second Amendment protects the bearing of "arms", not 'guns', I can't also legally buy cannons, napalm and tactical nuclear warheads - just in case the neighborhood gets a little rowdy?), also comes the lovely 'freedom' to join the 35,000 or so Americans every year who become very stiff corpses as a result of the massive proliferation of weapons in which America uniquely specializes. Perhaps you'd rather live in Europe, eh, enjoying being alive? Well, for the rest of you non-sissies out there, conservatives have made sure that you have the freedom to take your bullet along with you when you're buried. What cheese-eating Frenchman ever had that freedom?

Conservatives are also busy making sure that there is plenty of freedom for corporations to pollute the land, water and air we depend on for survival. Regulation is bad, you see. Very bad. It's much better to have freedom - including your freedom to get sick, or to live in a world careering toward global disaster - than it would be to impede on the freedom of the super-rich to make themselves super-duper-rich.

No need to worry too much about the health implications of global warming, arsenic or radioactive waste, though. Chances are you won't live long enough to get killed this way, or to be shot by somebody whose freedom to own a gun has been well protected by nice right-wing people. That's because conservatives are also on the front-lines in the lonely battle fighting to make sure that you have the opportunity to join the more than 47 million Americans free from having healthcare coverage, or the many tens of millions more whose policies are insufficient to keep them alive. Don't you feel good knowing you're free from the evils of 'socialized' medicine? Isn't profit-driven corporate non-care so much better? Forget about "Give me liberty or give me death". Now you can have both!

One thing you can't argue about, however, is that it is conservatives who will keep your taxes down. Right? Well, yeah, if you mean this year. And if you mean nickels and dimes. But then, by applying the same logic, making your house payment on a credit card would be defined as keeping your monthly expenses down. (Of course, since you're about to lose your house anyhow, as a result of conservative economics, that may be a moot point.) But there's just these two little problems. One is that the nice people who loan you money invariably want to be paid back. And, two, they want interest on the loans as well. I don't know who middle-class Americans dreamed would be paying for their meager tax cuts, which - along with massively increased government spending by those

paragons of fiscal responsibility, you guessed it, conservatives - were funded by charging it all on the federal plastic, but you can bet America's creditors know all our addresses. They'll find us when the bill comes due.

Of course, this is only the beginning. What the tax cuts were really about was shifting the burden of funding government from the wealthy to the middle class, and from today's generation to tomorrow's. So, not only will middle class Americans, or their kids, have to pay back everything borrowed these last six years to fund their piddly little tax cuts, plus interest accrued, but they will also be paying for the massive tax cuts that were given to the massively wealthy.

Which, of course, is really what the whole elaborate kabuki dance of conservative 'freedom' was ever all about, from the beginning. As one of the greatest political marketing ploys of all time, it used pathetic middle class tax cuts plus supremely ironic restrictions on social and personal liberties to sell a bunch of frightened naifs on the notion that conservatism is the ideology of freedom, all so that the uber-class could realize their dream kleptocracy in place of a government actually devoted to public service. And, remarkably, it worked - at least for a time.

Don't you feel better now that you're free after decades of Reagan, Gingrich, Bush, Cheney, DeLay and Scalia? You're free to shut up with your unpopular ideas. You're free from having to make difficult decisions when you're pregnant. You're free to be arrested for smoking a joint to keep from vomiting while you're doing chemotherapy. You're free from having to worry about which sex you're going to sleep with or marry. You're free from protection against guns or from long life in a healthy environment. And when you do get shot or sick, you're free from adequate medical care. Moreover, should you find yourself stuck with a painful and terminal illness, you're also free from either stem-cell remedies or your own choice to end your suffering and die with dignity.

You're also free to fall through the tattered safety net of government programs during a recession or a depression, and you'll likely be free from making those pesky house payments very much further into the future either. You're free from wondering whether the rest of the world hates you and your country because it's been undermining democracies, propping up dictators, and invading oil-rich countries on the basis of completely fabricated war rationales. You're free from having to pay your taxes today. But you'll also be free from buying those things you wanted tomorrow, as you'll instead be paying today's taxes, interest on those taxes, tomorrow's taxes, plus the share that the wealthy used to pay.

So whattaya think? Ain't conservative freedom great?

Next time you hear a conservative ranting about the wonder and joys of freedom, tell them: "Yeah, no kidding, freedom is a really good thing. You'd like it even better if you actually tried it out some time."

David Michael Green is a professor of political science at Hofstra University in New York. He is delighted to receive readers' reactions to his articles (email above), but regrets that time constraints do not always allow him to respond. More of his work can be found at his website, www.regressiveantidote.net.

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