

# Bloc Busters

By Virginia I. Postrel

**Conservatives' sudden discomfort with markets threatens the GOP coalition.**

**W**HEN HE ISN'T BUSY DEFENDING the Unabomber's message in the pages of *The Nation*, self-styled "neo-Luddite" Kirkpatrick Sale gives speeches attacking just about every technological improvement since fire. The speeches end with a bang, as Sale hauls out a sledgehammer and smashes a personal computer.

It is a powerful image, akin to burning books. It lashes out at science, at progress, at the future, at intelligence itself. It strikes horror even in sympathetic audiences.

And it turned up this fall—uncritically and unironically—on the cover of *The Weekly Standard*, a magazine whose editorial mission is to define the parameters of respectable conservatism, to promulgate the official line in the new conservative order. "Smash the Internet," read the accompanying headline. The articles subsumed under that title included a sensible-but-routine debunking of Internet hype and a slightly hysterical tour of loony and perverse on-line newsgroups. To anyone who owns a Web browser, the cover art was more newsworthy than the articles. But the art said plenty.

I mention this incident not because it is particularly important in and of itself but because it represents a disturbing trend among the conservative intelligentsia (and a few friendly politicians): a campaign, conscious or unconscious, to ostracize libertarian ideas in general—and free markets in particular—as dull or dangerous. That campaign has political consequences, weakening congressional resolve to seriously roll back government.

The problem, as one congressional insider explains it, is that most members of Congress can't imagine doing without government—in any aspect of life. "They're good conservatives so they want to reduce government," he says. "But they think of that as getting as close to the abyss as possible without falling off."

And so, one year into the Republican Congress, the scope of the federal government continues to grow, and conservatives spend most of their time talking about the terrible state of the "culture." After a brief flirtation with regulatory reform, Bob Dole now directs his energies toward denouncing the movies.

Republicans have allowed cultural obsessions to shape even their budget battles. A whack at corporate welfare would have done wonders to show that GOP lawmakers are equal-opportunity budget cutters. But business handouts have no moral significance outside libertarian circles—there's no sex involved, no families—so Congress felt little pressure to upset business interests to prove a point. The Commerce Department survives, its pork-dispensing powers mostly intact, as Republicans allow themselves to be painted as the enemies of impoverished babies.

**I**F YOU'RE CONVINCED THAT THE ONLY thing conservatives should care about is "culture," you'll ignore the core "leave us alone" issues that unite the GOP coalition. And you'll end up like Phil Gramm.

The man who once bragged of being "the Gramm in Gramm-Rudman," who stood virtually alone against nationalized health insurance and invoked the Dickey Flatt test of whether government spending was justified, now spends his time trying to convince the Christian Coalition he's with them on abortion. Amid such craven pandering, his perfectly sound ar-

guments against sending troops to Bosnia come off as pure opportunism, and his economic policies don't even get reported in the press. He has muffled his natural free market message. He wants us to believe he's for "more freedom and less government," but instead of talking about taxes, guns, or property rights, he debates the finer points of theology—the precise relationship between faith and works—with conservative Christians.

And, judging from my Thanksgiving jaunt to South Carolina, he is in big trouble in that must-win state. Liberals know he's the devil, close observers think he'll say anything to get elected, and most people haven't a clue who he is. Looking up from a newspaper article about how Gramm's campaign considers the state critical, my brother—a third-year medical resident with libertarian leanings, someone who worried a good deal about ClintonCare—declared, "Gramm isn't going to win South Carolina if I have no idea what he stands for." He's right. Gramm's campaign is melting down, and not just because he's egotistical and "mean."

"I sense a total breakdown of the vision thing... I can't believe I have to vote for Bob Dole," a libertarian Republican money manager recently e-mailed me in a blue funk. No wonder polls show Steve Forbes running second in New Hampshire, with about 10 percent to Dole's 37 percent. He may be slightly geeky, but at least he's not ashamed of his message.

**L**IBERTARIANS ARE NOT, OF COURSE, CONSERVATIVES. In that sense, it's not surprising to see conservative magazines using *libertarian* as a vaguely pejorative word and scrupulously avoiding challenges to the regulatory state. The faster big-government liberalism collapses, the faster the political spectrum will reconfigure itself between libertarian (read: real

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## EDITORIALS

liberal) and conservative poles. But such a reconfiguration is premature. To deny that libertarians make up an important part of the current Republican coalition is akin to suggesting that Bill Clinton does not need black votes to win reelection.

And full-blown libertarians are only part of the story. Republican strategists endanger their party's future if they assume that grassroots voters want to hear only "cultural" messages about the evils of Hollywood and the sins of unwed mothers. Even evangelical Christians pay taxes, struggle with regulations, and want the government to leave them alone. The most Republican group in Times Mirror's typology of voters—and the most politically informed and active—is the "Enterprisers." They believe in God, certainly, and hold socially conservative attitudes, but they vote on economic issues and don't trust government.

REPUBLICANS SWEEP INTO OFFICE BY painting Democrats as people who want the government to boss you around and destroy the things you love: Clinton and the old Congress, they could say, want to control your personal life by nationalizing health care and foisting weird ideas on your kids; they want to run your business, take away your land and your guns, and force your church to hire gay atheists as choir directors; if you protest too much or seem too odd, they'll send the FBI to shoot you down.

It wasn't always the most nuanced or sophisticated message, but it was close enough to the truth. And it worked.

So Republicans now have the power to boss people around and destroy the things they love—and they are loath to give that power up. They have plenty of court intellectuals who'll give them reasons not only to keep it, but to exercise it vigorously: reasons why the Internet cannot be left to evolve without federal regulation, for example, and no public school can be allowed to say anything remotely tolerant about gays.

The irony is that cultural—or at least religious—conservatives have at least as great an interest in shrinking the powers

of government, especially in the economic sphere, as do yuppie Republicans. As long as fledgling churches and neighborhood minyans are shut down by zoning boards, and anti-discrimination laws are interpreted to forbid Bible verses on paychecks while forcing landlords to rent to unmarried couples, religious conservatives will need Richard Epstein's legal scholarship more than Allan Bloom's attacks on rock music.

And though Bill Bennett now sees the merits of school choice, he was none-too-keen on the notion when serving as education secretary and chief culture czar. Decentralist-come-lately Lamar Alexander also did precious little to advance choice when he was educator-in-chief. Giving parents, rather than bureaucrats, control over where kids go to school is an idea only someone who appreciates freedom and competition would conceive—which is why it came from Milton Friedman. (Who, by showing policy makers how to crush inflation, also did more to restore the possibility of thrift than a thousand conservative lectures on the "cultural contradictions of capitalism" and the erosion of the Protestant ethic.)

When mainstream conservatives were whimpering about the media and trying to use the Fairness Doctrine to force CBS to be nice to Richard Nixon, those boring old libertarians, with their tenacious belief in free speech and free markets, were building the intellectual case to dismantle the broadcasters' monopolies. The conservative voices on talk radio and cable TV can thank scholars like Ronald Coase, Ithiel de Sola Pool, and Tom Hazlett for caring about the future and paying attention to something other than the "culture."

Conservatives are wrong if they think such things do not matter, merely because they are the stuff of "commerce" rather than "culture." The "leave us alone" agenda, as David Frum has tried to explain to his fellow conservatives, must succeed before traditional values can have a chance of revival. And that agenda is fueled almost entirely by libertarian thought, libertarian rhetoric, and libertarian conviction.

# Sacking Markets

By Nick Gillespie

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**Don't blame capitalism for football's woes.**

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**H**ERE'S A CRASH COURSE IN THE rapidly changing geography of professional football. There's no test afterwards, but there is a larger lesson to be learned: Don't confuse pork-barrel handouts with free market incentives.

The Los Angeles Rams, who actually played in Anaheim and who once hailed from Cleveland, are now the St. Louis Rams. The Los Angeles Raiders, who once were the Oakland Raiders, are now the Oakland Raiders again. The Houston Oilers are set to become the Nashville Oilers in 1998. The Cleveland Browns want to become the Baltimore Browns.

There are rumblings that the Tampa Bay Buccaneers will move to Orlando. Or they may head for Los Angeles, which is also a possible relocation site for the Arizona Cardinals (née the Phoenix Cardinals, formerly the St. Louis Cardinals, previously the Chicago Cardinals). The Chicago Bears, once upon a time known as the Decatur, Illinois, Staleys, are eyeing Gary, Indiana, with wanderlust in their hearts.

Watching this flurry of actual and potential travel activity among National Football League teams, observers have quickly flushed out the culprits behind such unsettling movement: free markets and the "greed" that makes them work.

"This is all about one thing, and one thing only," Denver Bronco owner Pat Bowlen told the *Los Angeles Times*, shaking his head. "Money." In *The New York Times*, Alan Ehrenhalt, the executive editor of *Governing* magazine, intoned, "It is the tyranny of the market that has destroyed the loyalty of...teams to their cities."

Lamenting that sports team owners are "borrowing a page from the playbook of...businessmen," the *Boston Globe's* Charles Stein noted, "In business, there is no such thing as too much profit....When it comes to profits, the skybox is the limit." In a Senate subcommittee hearing on a proposed "fans' rights" bill, Sen. Patrick Leahy (D-Vt.) railed against "extortionist demands of insatiable [team] owners."

To be sure, there are economic forces at work in the movement of teams from here to there. For instance, Browns owner Art Modell doesn't want to move his team to Baltimore just because he has a hankering for crab cakes. Check out the bargain dangled in front of the man: Rent-free use of a brand spanking new \$200 million stadium paid for by a dedicated state lottery; up to \$80 million in one-time seat license fees for fans who want season tickets; luxury suites and club seats that fill Modell's pockets to the tune of about \$30 million a year; all proceeds from parking, concessions, and advertising signs; and \$75 million in moving expenses.

Who among us could resist such an offer, which is typical of, if a bit bigger than, the bargains offered to itchy franchise owners? I moved to Los Angeles for a job that pays less than half as much.

**B**UT SUCH DEALS HAVE LITTLE TO DO WITH the "tyranny of the market," unless you consider publicly funded stadium projects to be of central importance to private enterprise. When Bud Adams, the owner of the Houston Oilers, wanted a new stadium, he didn't think to build one—at least not by his lonesome self. He proposed that the city put up \$150 million for a \$235 million domed stadium that would house both the Oilers and the National Basketball Association's Rockets.

When Houston officials demurred,

Adams embraced Nashville's offer: a \$28 million "relocation" fee, a new stadium with 82 luxury suites, 9,600 "premium" seats, and 42,700 seat licenses, the proceeds from which will go to Adams. Nashville will kick in \$144 million and the state another \$80 million toward the stadium. Adams may well be as greedy as Midas, but that's not the problem.

The problem is the willingness of state and local governments to shell out taxpayer money for sports teams. This propensity includes expansion teams as well as traveling ones: To woo the NFL's Jaguars franchise, Jacksonville, Florida, raised hotel and parking taxes and levied ticket surcharges. The city spent \$124 million to refurbish the Gator Bowl, guaranteed ticket sales, deferred \$250,000 a year lease payments for five years, and even paid \$4 million to move a paint company from the site of a practice field.

The dizzying cost spiral of pork-barrel politics is even lost on hard-luck Cleveland. At the Senate hearing for the fans' rights bill, Mayor Michael R. White lobbied for legislation that would allow the city to keep the Browns in Cleveland. "We believe Congress and only Congress has the power to stop this insanity." To White, it is crazy that another city should woo his Browns and that Modell should follow the trail of money south. After all, as White told the panel, he had engineered a \$175 million stadium renovation deal by raising parking and sin taxes. The deal would have given Modell a free ride and kicked him into the top third of owners in profitability.

There is indeed insanity here, as well as tyranny, extortion, and greed. But the cause for concern has precious little to do with free markets and football—it has to do with politicians throwing low-percent-age bombs with the taxpayers' money. ☛

**We're pleased to announce** that Michael Fumento has joined REASON as a science correspondent for the next 15 months, under a grant from the William H. Donner Foundation, and that Nick Gillespie has been promoted to senior editor.